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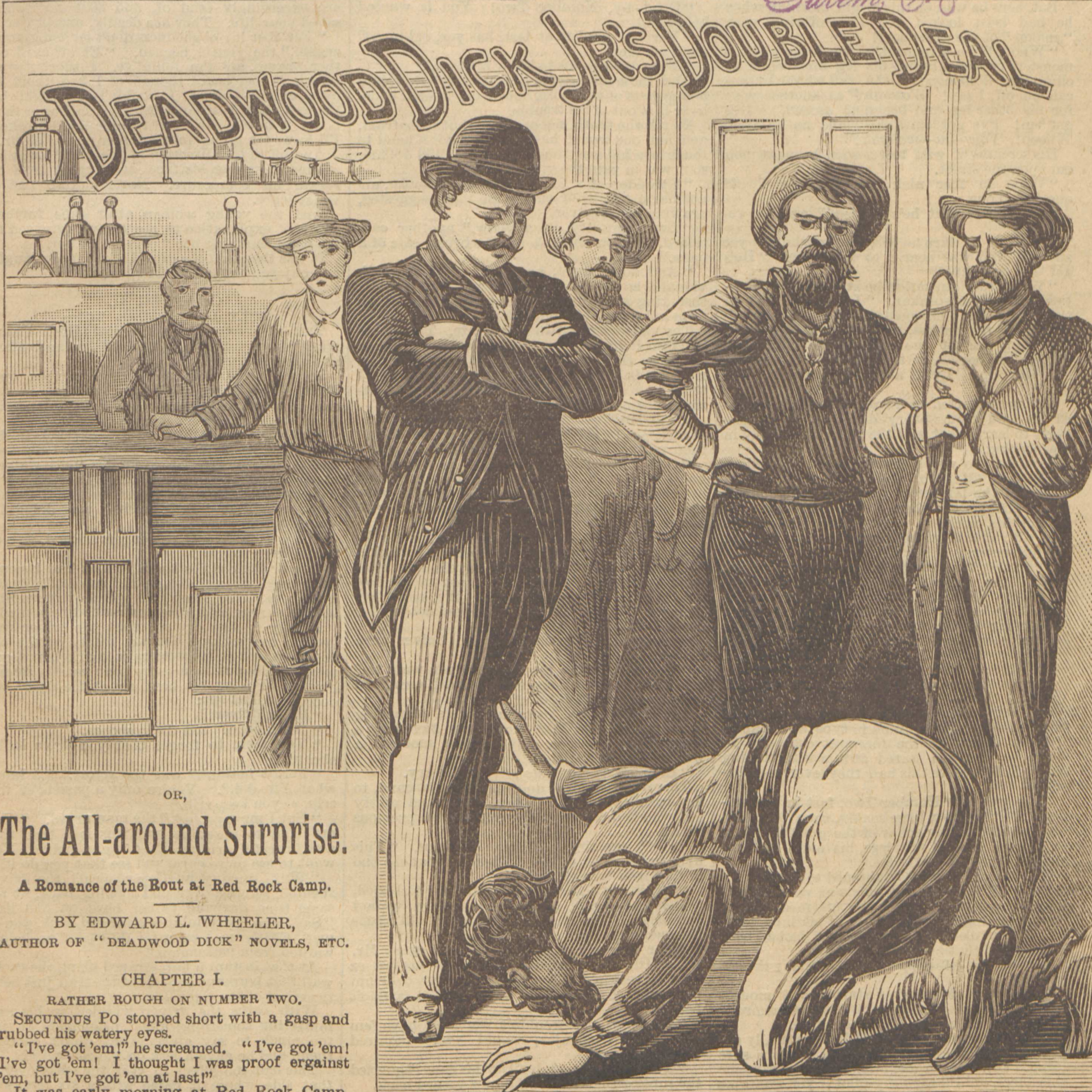
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*W. B. Randall,
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OR,

The All-around Surprise.

A Romance of the Rout at Red Rock Camp.

BY EDWARD L. WHEELER,
AUTHOR OF "DEADWOOD DICK" NOVELS, ETC.

CHAPTER I.

RATHER ROUGH ON NUMBER TWO.

SECUNDUS PO stopped short with a gasp and rubbed his watery eyes.

"I've got 'em!" he screamed. "I've got 'em! I've got 'em! I thought I was proof ergainst 'em, but I've got 'em at last!"

It was early morning at Red Rock Camp. Secundus Po, better known as "Number Two," had just been over to the Hard Luck Saloon, and

DEADWOOD DICK STOOD SILENT AND SMILING. THE HERCULEAN FIRE-EATER GOT DOWN UPON HIS KNEES AND GROVELED BEFORE HIM!

was on his way back to his cabin to get something less important in the way of breakfast.

He had covered about half the distance from the saloon to his humble abode, when suddenly, right in his path, reared up some five or six monstrous snakes of differing kinds, each with a glittering collar around its neck, and these collars armed with pointed golden spikes!

It was something well calculated to chill the heart of any mortal. With heads up, mouths wide open and their forked tongues playing in and out hideously, and their spiked collars flashing in the sunlight, it was almost enough to paralyze the bravest man, at first blush. But, Secundus Po looked upon it, and not without good reason, as a manifestation of that form of delirium tremens vulgarly known as "snakes in the boots."

Secundus was a hard drinker. The last thing at night, and the first thing in the morning, with him, was a dose of his self-styled "elixir of life." The "heaven of death" would have been a far more fitting name, and especially for such vile stuff as was to be had at Red Rock. And it had been his boast, all along, that nothing that was ever made could make him see snakes. He was copper lined, he declared, and it could not have any baneful effect upon a stomach such as his.

But, here he was, on this bright morning when he had least looked for it, suffering with "snakes" of the worst sort!

"Whoop!" he screamed, as the largest of the monsters twined around his leg and began to climb up. *Whoop!* Satan, call off yer imps—call 'em off, I say! *Waughh!* as another went for his other leg and began to ascend. "I've got 'em! I've got 'em at last, and no mistake. *Whoop! Yow—ow—woughh!*"

His screams of wild terror soon brought men out upon the street.

"What in ther nick ails Number Two?" questioned one.

"He hollers that he's got 'em," another responded.

"Yas, an' by darn he has, too!" exclaimed yet another, who was nearer to the scene. "He's got 'em, or I have!"

"What ther durnation be et, anyhow?" questioned the first speaker. "Looks like he's in ther grasp of a ten-legged monster, from hyar."

"Et ar' real snakes, that's what et ar'!" cried the man nearest the unfortunate Secundus. "Come on, boyees, or ther infernal things will eat him up. Look at ther varmint, will yer!"

This man started on a run, and others followed his lead from every direction, every one eager to learn what was the trouble so early in the morning.

Secundus Po was still screaming and yelling his loudest. More of the snakes were on him now, and the largest of them all had mounted to his shoulders, where, with one cold coil around his neck, it was looking him in the face with mouth wide open and tongue darting and quivering.

"I'll never touch another drop—never, never, never!" the poor victim screamed. "Only let me go this oncet, Mister Devil, an' you'll never have 'casion ter call fer me ergain! Don't swoller me—don't, don't! I'll swear off right here an' now, if you'll only let me go! Don't put yer face so close! I can't stand it—I can't, I can't! Help! Help! Help! Oh! fer ther luv o' goodness, somebody come an' take 'em off. *Whoop! Oooo—*"

And with that he went off into a series of shrieks that sets description in type at defiance.

About that time the foremost came up to where he was, and stared at him with bulging eyes. Nothing like this had they ever seen before.

There was poor Number Two, fast in the embrace of at least six huge snakes, each of which was armed with the collar of the golden spikes. They were around his legs, his arms and his neck, and he was powerless.

The man was almost frightened to death. His hat was off, his dank red hair was on end, perspiration was streaming down his face, and he was screaming to the full limit of his lung power. It was clear that he believed he had been sent for and that he would have to go.

Nor was the effect upon the others any the less striking.

There they stood, eyes staring and mouths agape, looking helplessly on while their comrade struggled vainly with his hideous foes.

"Can't yer take 'em off?" he frantically appealed. "If yer can't, I'm gone, that's a sure thing. Oh! Spare me, Mister Devil, spare me this oncet, an' I'll turn sky-pilot if yer wants me to."

Such a promise as this, from such a man, caused some in the crowd to snicker.

"Et ain't no laffin' matter," averred one. "I believe et ar' ther devil an' his imps come fer poor Po. I've heerd tell o' sich things."

"Fer ther luv o' goodness don't let him take me!" the victim screamed. "Git a Bible, if thar's one in ther camp, an' open et at him! Do something—do anything! Can't yer git 'em off?"

"I opine they's rale snakes," one man ventured.

"I tells yer they hain't!" disputed the superstitious first speaker. "See ther spiked collars they has got on, will yer? 'Sides, who ever heerd tell o' sech snakes as them, in these parts? I tell yer it's ther devil, an' my opine is that it's all up with Number Two."

Upon hearing this, Mr. Po yelled the louder. Never in its history had Red Rock Camp seen anything to equal this.

The continued shouting and screaming had by this time brought out every man in the camp.

And in the crowd were drinkers who looked upon the affair with every sort of emotion. Some with superstitious fear, others with abject horror and terror, others still with grim amusement.

Said one man:

"Good-by, Number Two! You is wanted below!"

"Yer has got 'em at last, has yer, old man?" from another.

"Ther devil seems to know his own."

And those all around the poor fellow volunteered jests of that sort, but no one offered to deliver him out of his trouble.

To tell the truth, not one there but was afraid, and not one would have reached out a hand to touch the hideous things for a hundred dollars, so it was in vain the victim called.

"I wonder ef a feller could kill a snake, an' not harm ther poor cuss?" one man suggested, drawing his revolver.

"Don't you try et, anyhow," another cautioned. "You couldn't hit the broad side of a barn."

"And don't shoot, anyhow," cried the individual who was so superstitious. "Ef yer do, ther king snake is likely ter bring a host of his imps an' scoop ther hull camp."

The victim was getting desperate. The snakes had him helplessly fast in their embrace, and no less than three of them were waving their horrible heads before his face, though as yet none of them had offered to bite. His torture was getting to be unbearable.

"Kill 'em!" he cried. "Kill 'em! Shoot 'em!—knife 'em! Do anything ter git me out of ther power, I don't keer what et ar'."

But that was just it. No one in the crowd knew what to do, and three or four minutes had now elapsed. Secundus Po was getting so weak that he could hardly stand, and was faint with his shouting.

"Et ar' plain thet somethin' hev got ter be did," finally declared one Hiram Hawkins. "Ther snakes ar' real enough, boyees, no matter whar they comed from. We must tackle 'em with our knives, that's all. We can't see Number Two chawed up by 'em, an' not try ter do anything."

Several agreed with him, and knives were drawn.

"Yer is welcome ter do et, ef yer want to," cried the superstitious man, "but I wants no hand in et meself, b'gum!"

Mr. Hawkins and his backers were advancing to the attack, and there would soon have been a lively fight, perhaps, but at that moment a woman's voice checked them.

"Stop, sirs! Stop, stop!" was the cry.

There was a pause, and all looked around, to find running toward them a young and pretty girl who had come into the camp on the previous night.

"Ha!" exclaimed Hiram Hawkins. "This hyar explains et, fellers. These is what she had in ther iron trunk!"

"Don't, pray don't kill my pets!" the girl cried. "They got out of the room, somehow, while I was asleep. Don't harm them, and I will rescue the man all right."

"Fer ther luv o' goodness do et," cried Mr. Po. "Git ther cussed things off o' me jest ez soon ez ye kin. I thort et was ther delirium tremenjus, but I mought 'a' knowed et couldn't be."

"I reckons yer wouldn't want ter have 'em any more tremenjus, would yer?" inquired Hawkins.

"Then ain't et ther devil an' his gang?" queried the superstitious man, who now turned back.

"No more'n you is," assured Hawkins.

On the previous evening this young woman had come into the camp by the stage from the west.

She had with her an iron trunk, large and moderately heavy, in which she said she had some pet animals. There were holes in the trunk to admit air, but these were so arranged that nothing could be seen inside.

She had not given any explanation further, and no one had for a moment suspected that the "animals" were snakes. The trunk had been carried to her room in the hotel—the "Red Rock Roost," and little had been thought about it afterward. She had registered as "Mlle. Laure."

As she spoke, now, she advanced toward Secundus, holding out her arms and speaking to the snakes, and immediately their heads were turned toward her.

She stepped nearer, and gradually they unfolded themselves from around the innocent victim of an unintended joke, twining their way over her arms to her neck and shoulders, where finally they all nestled.

"Fortunately they have not harmed you, sir," she then spoke pleasantly to the trembling Po. "If you will pardon me, I will say that it must have been the smell of whisky about you that drew them to you. It is something they are exceedingly fond of, and that no doubt saved your life. They are deadly, except two."

"Fer ther luv o' goodness don't let 'em git out ergain," the victim begged. "Et ar' hard on ther narves, an' I'm tellin' ye. I thort it was snakes in ther boots, though ef I hed thort et over calmly—which I couldn't—I would 'a' knowed that was onpossible, fer snakes in ther boots is never goin' ter trouble me. Reckon I'll have ter go an' take another dose o' elixir."

And off in the direction of the Hard Luck he started, mopping his face and trying hard to regain his composure. Never had he had a worse scare.

And the young woman, after some further words of explanation to the crowd, returned to the hotel, carrying her "pets" with her.

It was then that the crowd broke into a laugh, and enjoyed to the full the rare joke.

CHAPTER II.

ONLY A PASSENGER, BUT—

THE afternoon stage for Red Rock Camp was "humping" along toward its destination at an unusual gait.

It was unusual in more respects than one. First, it was doing more than common in the way of speed, and then it was veering in and out occasionally, in a very erratic manner.

And the cause of it all was discoverable in the fact that the driver, one Mohammed Bijukes, had a little more of the Indian's "fire-water" aboard than he could conveniently absorb, without permitting it to go to his brain in the usual way; and that "little more" was doing its work for him.

There were several passengers aboard, two of whom were women.

Two or three times these women had become frightened, when the stage had run along for the space of a rod or so on two wheels, in rounding abrupt curves, and some protest had been made.

Finally it was evident that the driver was getting too reckless for the safety of the old hearse, and the passengers it carried, and one man inside put in a more than usually strong protest. Poking his head out at the top of the door, he called out:

"Hello, driver!"

"Wull, hello!" was the response.

"You seem to forget that you have ladies aboard."

"Fergit nothin'!" was the retort. "I know what I'm doin'. You're only a passenger this trip, so you keep still."

"But I must protest," the man urged. "You are likely to upset us, and this is a trail that needs careful driving, if I am any judge. You want to use more care, and see that you do it."

"Wull, durn your impudence!" the driver shouted, leaning over and looking back, at the same time drawing rather hard on one line. "Say, who is drivin' this hyar old hack, you or me? Ef it's me, I want ter do et, an' no help is wanted from passengers."

At that instant a hub scraped along the rocky wall that bordered one side of the trail just here, the effect of the tight line.

With oaths the driver wheeled in his seat, muttering something about passengers having too much to say about what didn't concern them, and he gave a jerk on the other line.

This had the effect to veer the stage over to that side, where it came within six inches of toppling over the edge and plunging down into

a deep gulch—rather fissure—which bounded the narrow trail on that side. It was a close call, and the wonder was that it did not result seriously.

The women screamed, and the man within uttered an imprecation.

"Comes o' durn passengers tryin' ter run ther hearse!" growled the driver, jerking and sawing at the reins to excuse himself from the fault. "Passengers what don't know enough ter be passengers an' nothin' else, orter stay ter home, b'gum. When Mohammed Bijukes wants help ter drive, then he'll give up stage-drivin' an' go ter drivin' hogs ter swill."

Having got the horses in the middle of the trail once more, he managed to keep them there for a time, and it is at this interval that we, so to say, get aboard.

The horses had by this time become excited, and were quite irritable, smarting as they were under too frequent applications of the black-snake, and it would require but little to madden them.

If anything, the trail continued to grow worse instead of better, and the women inside began to grow more and more nervous, though just now everything was working fairly well, it being on a straight stretch bounded by two walls where it could hardly be otherwise.

Suddenly, and without any reason, so far as could be discovered, the driver applied his whip with full vigor, and with wild snorts the horses sprung into a run.

At this the man inside, the one who had protested before, rose with a grim expression of face that spoke of firm resolve.

With a word of encouragement to the women, he opened the upper half of the door and reached out.

It was done quietly, and gradually, his hands having laid hold upon the rail on top, he drew himself out of the stage, and finally his heels disappeared from the view of those within.

There were already two on top besides the driver.

One of these was a Chinaman, and the other a red-shirted miner, and both were clinging to the rail for dear life, pale and anxious.

They eyed the new-comer from within with something of amazement, and the miner would have spoken had not a cautioning look warned him to keep still. They were instinctively aware that something was going to happen.

Once on top, the passenger from within looked around, taking in everything, and evidently calculating chances.

Ahead, and not a great distance ahead, either, the trail seemed suddenly to end. There was a gap, and nothing beyond but a stretch of sky and distant hills. And whether the trail there turned to right or left, or went straight on at a rapid incline, could not be told.

But one thing was sure: Danger—death—was ahead there, unless another hand got control of the reins.

"We're goin' around ther Giant's Knuckle on a hell bender!" the driver was at that moment shouting, as he applied the whip. "We're goin' around on ther left hind wheel, with all ther others spinnin' clear! I'll show ther tenderfoot passengers who's runnin' this hyar hearse! Scar' em clear out of their wits this hyar time, or my name ain't—"

He was suddenly interrupted.

His words had given the daring passenger the cue as to the direction of the trail beyond the pass.

Reaching forward, this personage laid hands suddenly upon his shoulders, and with a single jerk, landed him on top on the flat of his back.

It was the work of a second, and in that second was included the snapping of a pair of handcuffs upon his wrists.

"Hold him, you two!" the passenger directed the miner and the Chinaman.

The order was sharp and stern, and the pair obeyed without thought or question.

The driver struggled, in vain, but without waiting to see anything of that, the passenger from inside sprung to the box, thence to the pole, and was immediately upon the back of the near horse.

It was his only course, since now the reins were dragging, and the end of the pass was at hand.

With hands upon the check-reins he spoke commandingly yet soothingly to the animals, trying to stop their mad rush, but it looked as though his efforts would be in vain.

Out through the gate of the pass they plunged, and it had to be quick and determined work to catch the direction of the trail and guide them. But, having the cue from the drunken driver's words, it was a degree easier.

With determined grasp, with a strength that showed muscles of steel, and with constant soothing and yet commanding words, the maddened horses were drawn to the left, and the stage went on two wheels for a considerable distance, almost threatening to go over, once or twice.

But it settled down again, and then for a quarter of a mile there was a dead stretch of trail so narrow that it was hardly safe even at a walk, and on either side was a deep abyss.

Down this trail the horses plunged, but now under more control, and it was not until some distance beyond it that they were checked and finally stopped.

In the mean time the drunken driver had been overcome, and the miner was gagging him with the butt of a revolver to stop his shouting.

"By ther Harry, young pard," the miner now cried, "but I thort that 'ar war a ride to ther death!"

"I had some thoughts that way myself," was the smiling response, "and so it would have been, too, if we had left it to that miserable wretch. He ought to be debarred from ever mounting the box again."

"Yer is right in sayin' that. But, what is you goin' ter do with him?"

"We'll keep him right where he is, and I will do the driving the rest of the way."

"But, yer don't know ther trail, does yer?"

"No; but I guess it is plain enough, and we'll let the horses take their own direction if we come to a fork."

While speaking, the younger man was gathering up the dusty lines and making sure that everything was all right, while he petted and caressed the trembling animals to inspire them with confidence again.

Finally he mounted the box, and the stage moved on.

"Shell I take this hyar gun out of ther cuss's mouth?" the miner asked.

"Yes, if he will keep his head shut. If he don't, then you can clap it in again. We have had enough of his idiotic work."

The butt of the pistol was removed, and as soon as the ex-driver could clear his throat, for he had almost strangled while so uncomfortably gagged, he hastened to demand:

"Say, young feller, who be you, anyhow?"

"Oh, I'm only a passenger," was the easy response.

"Waal, yer has got gall enough fer a stage-load, that is all I have got ter say erbout ye."

"That is letting me off easy. Didn't know but you would be thirsting for my blood, seeing that I have dethroned you. What were you thinking about, anyhow? You would have plunged off to certain death."

"Haw! haw! Yer don't know Moham Bijukes, young feller. I could 'a' taken ther old cheese-box around thar on one hind wheel, I'm a-tellin' ye."

"Well, I didn't feel like taking the risk, and, besides, I know you couldn't have done it. The horses were out of your control. It took all my muscle to keep them to the road."

"Much muscle you've got!" in contempt.

"Well, we will not argue the case, my friend. I'll be driver for the rest of the way, if you please, and you can play passenger. If you keep orderly it will be all right with you. If not, then you'll be gagged again."

In a way that proved he was no greenhorn the young man drove along, the horses under full control, and confidence restored among the passengers. And now, who and what was this passenger who had played so daring and important a role? There is something about him that is familiar.

We look again, and more searchingly. He is a man of medium size, apparently about thirty years of age, good-looking, with piercing black eyes and graceful mustache—Surely we ought to know him. Ha! without disguise who could mistake him? It was the redoubtable Richard—our own Deadwood Dick, Jr.

CHAPTER III.

BIJUKES SEEKS SATISFACTION.

RED ROCK CAMP was enjoying a boom.

With one mining company already planted there, another rich strike had recently been made and another company was just beginning operations.

Peace and prosperity seemed to hover over the place, but all was not as peaceful as appeared on the surface. There was a rivalry between the two companies that was not pleasant.

The old company, jealous of the new, was making its road as rough as possible. The mines were close together, and while there

had been no actual outbreak, it was not by any means unlikely that one might come at any time.

When the stage rolled into the camp, on this afternoon, it found the usual crowd awaiting its arrival at the hotel.

This crowd indicated to the new driver where to stop, and with a crack of the whip and a flourish he brought the old "hearse" up in about the right spot, in true Jehu style.

Before the stage had come anywhere near to a stop, however, the absence of the regular driver from the box was noticed, and comments were being freely made as to what had brought about the change. And who could the new driver be? His face had never been seen there before.

"Here we are, citizens!" Dick called out, as he threw down the ribbons.

"But whar's Mohammed Bijukes?" was eagerly demanded.

"Oh, he's a passenger this trip."

"He ain't dead!"

"Ner sick!"

"Neither, my friends. He is simply suffering from too much jig-water, and we had to lay him out, that's all."

"But he ain't laid out fer keeps, an' ye kin bet yer life on't!" the driver cried, now sitting up on top of the stage. "Et ar' my turn ter laugh now, me boyee."

This to Dick.

"Very well, sir, laugh all you want to, if you have got anything to laugh about," Dick invited. "If there's anything that tickles you, go right ahead and laugh just as loud and long as you want to."

"But et won't be no laffin' matter fer you, me hunkey, at ther same time."

"It won't, eh? Well, let's wait till the passengers get out, and then we'll see about that. You stay where you are for the present."

And it looked as though Mr. Bijukes would have to.

The door of the stage had opened, and the two women mentioned got out. One was a young woman of neat appearance, clad in a very serviceable flannel. The other was evidently much older, judging by her movements. She was clad in black and her face was veiled.

Looking about her with keen eye, the young woman took the elder by the arm and led her in the direction of the hotel, saying nothing to anybody.

After them came a portly, well dressed man, who, as soon as he set his foot on solid ground, exclaimed:

"Thank the Lord!"

"What fer, sir?" queried the miner who had just got down from on top.

"What for! Why for bringing us here with whole necks, of course."

"Oh! Well, I kin voice ther same sentymint, stranger, but I must add to et. I say—Bless the Lord—and this hyer young man!"

"Oh, don't count me in it," protested Dick. "I was only a passenger, you know, and I suppose I was only the humble instrument anyhow. I can echo the same sentiment myself."

The passengers all out, and the mail and other things having been secured, it only remained to get the driver down from the top.

And it was now that the crowd was becoming eager for a full explanation of the whole matter, and the miner took it upon himself to tell what had been done, not failing to give Dick all credit.

"An' et war all a rank humbug game!" cried Mr. Bijukes. "Jest ez if I couldn't managed ther old hearse. But, I'll take et out'n his hide, jest ez soon as I git down thar and git my hands free, an' you see'f I don't. I don't 'low no passenger ter bounce me off'n my box, you bet!"

"You had to allow it that time, anyhow, my friend," remarked Dick.

"Don't yer call me yer friend!" was the cry. "I'm yer p'izen enemy, an' don't ye fergit it."

"Oh, well, a man is bound to have enemies, I suppose. But I don't hold any grudge against you, so I'll get up there and free your hands and you can get down. I don't want any trouble with you, however."

"No, I opine not. Waal, you jest sot my hands free, an' we'll see."

"All right, here you are."

With that, Dick sprung up, and in a moment the handcuffs were off and out of sight.

As soon as he had freed the man, Dick sprung back to the ground to be ready for whatever was to follow.

The driver got his legs over the side with care, probably being well aware that they were not to be trusted too far, and carefully let himself down.

Once upon the ground, then he stretched himself, and cried:

"Now then, passenger, et ar' you an' me ter settle this hyar thing. You has done me a insult what nothin' but a lickin' will square, an' that's what I've got to have."

"Well, that's what you may get, if you insist upon it."

"I meant ter say that's what I've got ter give ye."

"Oh, well, it don't make any difference what you meant to say. It is all the same in Dutch."

"We'll see whether et ar' or not. You jest come hyar till I dub ye one on ther snoot, an see how that will set on yer stummick. Don't ye run off, now, or et wull be ther wuss fer ye."

"Oh, I'm not running, never fear," said Dick. "But I don't want to fight with you now: you're drunk."

"Drunk, be I?"

"Drunk as a fiddler."

"Waal, all ther more reason why I'm goin' ter wollop ye. Ef I was sober I'd not be in half ther trim I'm in now. I'm fight all over, an' et has got ter be worked off somehow, sure pop."

"You had better take care of your horses, and let it drop."

"Skart, be ye?"

"Hardly."

"Yer act so."

"I'm willing to have you think I am, rather than fight you."

"Haven't ther least doubt erbout et, me honey. But yer has got ter fight. D'yer hear that? Yer has got ter fight. So peel yerself."

"Oh, that's too much trouble," carelessly. "If you must have it settled in that way, wade in. I'm willing to let you undeceive yourself, if you are so determined."

Needless to say that the crowd was interested. Bijukes was known as something of a fighter, when sober, and this man did not appear equal to him in strength, at a glance. But he was certainly not afraid.

"Waal, hyar I come," Bijukes warned.

With that he put up his big arms, with the fists doubled up like hams in appearance.

"Come right along and have it over with," Dick invited. "I don't feel like standing here long, after that tiresome ride."

"An' yer will feel a heap less like et, in erbout one minnit. Jest let me paste yer oncet on ther snoot, an' you'll have a pet ter nurse all night. You kin bet ye will," and then he sent in a blow, which, however, was brushed aside with all ease imaginable.

Another blow followed, with the same effect. And so with every blow, though they came thick and fast.

The crowd around began to see what manner of man this stranger was, now, and urged the enraged driver to exert himself a little and make one blow tell. But it was impossible.

Dick did not offer to strike back; he simply kept the man from hitting him. And so it lasted for several minutes, or, in fact, until the driver was out of breath and was forced to stop.

"Well, are you satisfied?" Dick demanded.

"Naw!" was the snort. "I'm goin' fer ye ergain in a minnit."

"It's no use. You can't fight, and never could. Besides, you are tired out now. You had better draw out."

"Nary a draw out, till I'm knocked out!"

"All right, just as you please."

"Sarve him right ter paste him, mister," some one suggested.

Dick smiled in a grim way, and waited.

Presently the fellow came for him again, with all the force and fury he could command; but he might as well have attacked a fort, single-handed. Deadwood Dick stood like a rock, and blow after blow was turned off with ready skill and grace.

But finally, evidently tired of fooling with the fellow, Dick took him in hand.

Knocking aside his flying arms, the detective caught his shoulder, whirled him around, laid hold upon him by his neck and waistband, and with so little effort that it seemed the easiest thing in the world, lifted him bodily and fired into him the open door of the stage.

"There," he said, closing the door upon him, "drive him around to the stables and let him cool off. Maybe he will be in his right mind by to-morrow."

The crowd gave a cheer, and the stage was led away, with the driver within, bellowing like a bullwhacker.

"Stranger, we don't know who you is, but you is ther king-pin o' this hyar camp, an' I'm bettin' rocks on et!" It was one of the hilarious crowd who spoke.

"Oh, no, I'm only a passenger," smiled Dick.

"But, anybody could have done the same with that drunken Jehu. He will feel better in the morning. And now for supper and rest."

And so saying, he made his way out of the cheering crowd, and entered the hotel, where he registered as Peter M. Prichards, from Walla Walla.

CHAPTER IV.

HIGH-STEPPER HIPE.

In the mean time the two women who had come by the stage had registered, as had also the man who has been mentioned as portly and well dressed.

The younger of the two women had entered the bar-room boldly, and made inquiries for lodging and board, and had registered for both. The name she set down was: "Hannah Hawson, and daughter."

She let fall the explanation that she was the daughter, and that her mother was a widow. Further than that she offered nothing, simply saying they probably would remain several days. She engaged the best room the humble hostelry afforded, and they immediately withdrew to it.

The man, who registered afterward, set himself down as Rupert Whitman.

He had little to say of himself, further than that he was on the lookout for mining opportunities.

Deadwood Dick glanced at these names, after inscribing his own, but whether for information or out of idle curiosity would have been hard to tell.

As he turned away from the bar he was confronted by Secundus Po.

"Most highly respected sir," that individual began, with a bow and a scrape, "may I have the honor of shaking hands with you?"

Deadwood Dick looked at him searchingly, and read him for what he was. His weak, watery eyes, his dank, alcoholic hair and beard, and his appearance, as a whole, told his story.

He had recovered from his snake scare, and quite evidently had forgotten all about his resolve to forswear strong drink.

"Upon what grounds do you claim the privilege?" Dick inquired.

"You have done me the greatest favor imaginable, sir."

"I am not aware of it, if I have. What was it?"

"First let me have the honor I crave, sir, the honor of grasping the hand that did the business for Mohammed Bijukes, and I will tell you my story."

"Well, here it is; shake it to your heart's content if it will be any satisfaction to you," and Dick extended his hand.

Secundus seized it and pressed it warmly.

"This does me good!" he cried. "This is the hand that tamed Bijukes, a thing I have been wantin' ter see done fer a dog's age, but which I hadn't the muscle to do myself."

"Then I take it that you have no brotherly love for Mr. Bijukes," observed Dick, reclaiming his hand.

"You have hit it right on the head, sir," Mr. Po assured.

He was a man who had, or had had, some education, as his language proved. It was usual for him to talk in the naked and inelegant lingo of the camp, but now he was evidently straining a point.

"And what is the story you promised to tell me?" asked Dick, humoring him.

"Ah! you remind me of it. Thank you. I am the son of a gentlemen and a scholar, sir. I am one of twins, the second born. At my appearing my father exclaimed—*Secundus!* and so they named me. I am familiarly known as Number Two."

Dick was smiling at the man's account of himself.

"But what has all this to do with your trouble with Mr. Bijukes?" he asked.

"Oh, it has nothing to do with that; that is, nothing in particular. Wanted to make myself known to you. My father being what I have told you, a gentleman and a scholar, accounts for my being what I am. It is one of those damnable freaks of nature for which there is no accounting. The son of a brilliant man is likely to turn out the reverse, ever time. Ever noticed it?"

"I believe I have; but that is rather rough on yourself."

"I know it, sir, know it. Had I my father's brain and muscle, I would have wilted Mr. Bijukes with scathing reproach, and finished him off with a paralyzing lifter; but, unfortunately, I have neither. So I had to bear with

his infamous outrage, and bide my time for the satisfaction you have given me."

"Well, I'm glad that I have been of some service to you, my man. But, what was the wrong he did you? It must have been something out of common, I should think; something for which forgiveness was impossible."

"It was as great a wrong as one man can do another," was the assertion.

"Ruined your home, blasted your life, and all that."

"Worse—far worse, sir!"

"Well, I fail to guess it, then."

"Listen to my tale of woe. One fair day, when the air was sweet with the blooms of spring, the birds were chirping on the boughs, and all nature was—"

"Never mind the trimmings," Dick waived.

"On such a day, sir, I came into this camp. I was tired, foot-sore and utterly disheartened. I had not tasted the elixir of life in four long days and nights, and I was strapped. But I came at a most opportune time."

"How was that?"

"When I entered this room some noble soul had just invited the crowd up to indulge, and I counted myself in immediately. I wedged in, thrust out my appealing hand, and a glass was put into it, a glass full to the brim with the real article. In happy anticipation I felt my soul smile within me."

"Yes?"

"Yes, of a truth I did. But, disappointment awaited me. At my side stood that infamous scoundrel, Mohammed Bijukes. He had just drained a glass, and putting it down, what did he do but lift mine out of my grasp and drain that too. I was horrified, and the reaction prostrated me. Had I been equal to the emergency, I would have massacred him on the spot. Had I been my father, I would have annihilated the wretch then and there. Can you wonder that I was eager to grasp your hand?"

"Perhaps not," said Dick.

"And the worst remains to be told," the fellow went on. "That lost glass of the needful elixir has never been replaced. I have been struggling along, one drink behind, ever since. Oh, sir, if you would only complete your Samaritan's mission! If you would only make good my loss, and put me abreast of the times. If you would only make me master of my record, instead of having my record master of me! If you—"

"Snakes!" sung out some one.

"You promised ther devil you'd swear off," reminded another.

"Why didn't you mention that part of it first?" asked Dick. "Step right up there, Mr. Po, and put another spike in your coffin if you want to, and I'll ante for it."

"May Heaven bless ye!" cried the camp bummer. "May ther horn o' plenty be ever turned in your direction, sir," dropping into his easier mode of speech. "May the headlight of prosperity ever beam upon ye, an' may—"

But Dick had tossed a coin to the bartender and turned away.

Just as he did so he ran plump against a great, giant bullwhacker of a fellow who had just come in.

"Why don't yer look whar ye is goin'?" the fellow demanded, in voice of thunder.

"Beg your pardon," said Dick. "Didn't see you till the collision had come."

"Wull, et war yer business ter see me."

"I suppose so, but accidents will happen, you know. No harm done, I hope."

"Yas, but thar is harm done, an' yer must beg my parding fer it. I'm knowed hyar as High-stepper Hipe."

"Well, Mr. High-stepper Hipe, I have already asked your pardon, but for the sake of peace I will do it again. Consider it done, and no bones broken."

Dick had noticed that the driver of the stage, Mr. Bijukes, was right behind this High Stepper and anticipated trouble.

"Yas," cried Mr. Hipe, "but thet 'ar don't fill ther bill. Et ain't ther way High-stepper Hipe ar' used to, et ain't. You will have ter take off yer hat an' bend ther knee to me."

"I'll see you further first!" cried Dick, in evident disgust.

"Yer mean ter say yer won't [do et? Thet yer won't—"

"You've got it as straight as a chalk mark," assured Dick. "I had no intention of bucking against you, and it was your fault as much as mine. In fact, I believe you did it on purpose. Now what are you going to do about it?"

"What be I goin' ter do about et? Great circumventin' cyclones! Yer can't never 'a' heard o' me, me gentle bantam. Why, I'm ther baddest

man from Badtown, I am. Badtown an' on ther Bad Mounting, whar ther higher ye climb ther badder they git. My roost war right on ther summit. *Wagh!*"

"I'd take you for a blower from Blowville," remarked Dick.

"Yer would, hey? I'll take that 'ar notion out of yer head, me gallus galoot. I'm a reg'lar old knock-'em-stiff, I am; a thoroughbred rounder from ther top of ther stack. I'm ther baddest bad man what ever used a dagger fer a toothpick. An' now ther best thing you kin do is ter git right down an' chaw dirt in ther manner I have indycated, or I shell hev ter proceed ter mop up ther floor with yer. Off with yer hat now, an' down onto yer leetle marrow-bones an' up with yer leetle paws, an' do ther perlite."

"Have I really got to do that?" asked Dick.

"Bet yer life on't!"

"And if I don't you'll wipe the floor with me?"

"Exactly. You has it straight."

"And you'll muss me all up, as it were; jam my head down into my breadbasket, tie my arms and legs up in double bowknots, and otherwise maltreat me?"

"Yas; an' a good deal wuss'n that, too. I'm a holy terror when I'm wound up, an' I'm wound clear over ther hub this hyar time. Git right down, now, or else I'll castergate ye or cough up a lung!"

"Well, if that is your determination, begin."

The invitation was so coolly spoken that it rather staggered the bullwhacker. From Dick's words, he had expected him to cower and obey him.

"Yer don't mean et!"

"You will find out that I do."

"Wull I? Great screechin' old circumventin' cyclones what devastated ther bloomin' acres o' old Job! Cully, I'm a snortin' smasher! I'm ther royal striped hyena from ther wilds, what kin eat a couple sich as you afore breakfast, an' never interfere with me reg'lar meals. Yer don't know me. Why, sonny, I'm a screamin' old howler, wi' double claws on both feet, an' nat'ral spurs on me ankles! Yer can't hold a candle to me fer badness, an' ye orter know et. I don't want ter harm ye, so ter let ye off easy I'll give ye half a minute in which ter change yer mind."

"You have heard my decision," said Dick, grimly, "so wade in."

"Great old he hossfly on Jonah's whale! Yer can't be so foolish, me sou. Ye don't never mean ter invite dire destruction in thet ar' reckless way, an'—"

Dick was tired, after his long journey by stage, and wanted his supper. Without further ado he pitched into the blowing braggart, caught hold of him in very much the same manner as he had previously taken hold of Mr. Bijukes, and turning him over a couple times, and bumping his head on the bar, and wiping up the floor with him in a general way, he ran him to the door and fired him out, giving him a parting kick to help him along—all to the immense delight of the huzzaing crowd.

CHAPTER V.

NOT DOWN ON THE PLAY-BILLS.

"I'm afraid you've signed your death-warrant, young man."

So spoke one man in the room, addressing himself to Dick, as soon as he was to be heard for the cheering of the crowd.

"Why?"

"Because High-stepper Hipe and Mohammed Bijukes are fast friends, and I am under the impression that High-stepper came in here to fix you out for what you did to Bijukes."

"Which is as plain as the nose on your face," assented Dick.

"And now you'll have both of them at you, like a pair of hungry dogs after a stray sheep."

"Well, let them come. They may find me the toughest bit of mutton they ever tackled, before they get done with me. I am not going to run away from them, that is a sure thing."

The man who had thus cautioned Richard was one Donald Mabey—a man of fifty years, substantial in appearance, well clad and of good presence and pleasing address.

Manager of the Rock Mine, he was a personage of some importance in the camp, and one whose word had considerable power in matters in general, though he was not the camp's mayor. That important office was held by Hiram Hawkins, to whom the reader already has been introduced.

Secundus Po was pushing to the fore to greet Dick again.

"The greatest Roman of them all!" he cried, as he tried to engage Dick's hand once more.

"It does me proud to take the liberty of shaking your hand again. You are a chief among chiefs, sir, and I would strain a point to drink another brimmer to your greatness. That was done fine!"

"That's all right," Dick hastily returned. "How about supper, landlord? I am like a famished wolf. I could eat a—"

But he was interrupted; the door was thrown suddenly open, and into the room sprung the two desperate ruffians who had met such signal defeat at Dick's hands.

And at him they rushed, straight, bellowing as they came.

"What did I tell you?" hastily reminded Mabey.

"The truth, I guess," Dick quickly answered. The next instant he had to handle himself lively to break the force of the combined attack. His hands flew with the quickness of light, the arms of both his assailants were brushed aside, and their rush was speedily checked.

"You are not satisfied yet, eh?" he cried.

"Nothin' but yer gore will sattersfy us now," cried the High-stepper.

"Well, then, wade in and take it," Dick invited. "I see you are bound to go for me, anyhow."

"Yer kin ruther bet on't!" shouted the High-stepper. "Yer got me foul ther other time, and yer done ther same ter Bijukes, an' we is goin' ter take et out of yer hide."

"Well, then, begin and don't waste any breath over it. I'd rather you would put it off till after supper, however, for then I would feel like doing you justice."

"Put off nothin'! Go fer him, Bijukes. You tackle him that side an' I'll take keer o' this. Now, at him!"

"You ought to do it, between you, surely," Dick laughed.

Then they were at it; and both rushed upon him at once, as before, but even more viciously.

Dick made it lively for them. Their blows were brushed aside about as fast as they came, and it was impossible for them to hit him.

And while they were still thus striking, parrying and maneuvering, the bell rung for supper.

"What's that, landlord?" Dick called out.

"That's ther supper bell," was the reply.

"Ha! it is, eh? Well, I can't miss my supper, boys!"

"Yer won't want any, when we gits done with ye," the High-stepper started to say, but he was cut short.

Dick went for them with all the powers of the skilled athlete that he was, and over they went, first one and then the other.

Bijukes went exploring, head-first, under a distant table, while the High-stepper tried to stand on his head in a corner; and while both were trying to get themselves together, Dick stepped out.

Dick had offered proof enough that they were no match for him, and when they got upon their feet, they were hooted at till they were glad to retreat.

"Ther darn skunk got skart, that's what's ther matter," cried Bijukes, as they took their leave. "He's no good, an' yer kin tell him so, fer us."

"An' yer kin add ther postscript that we ain't done with him yet," added the High-stepper.

"Wasn't it immense!" cried Mr. Po. "Really, I'd like ter drink another to his health, an' I'd run ther risk o' snakes ter do it."

But he was not given the opportunity, so had to satisfy himself upon what he had received.

Deadwood Dick repaired to his room to wash up and cool off, but in a little time was at the table.

There were the widow Hannab Hawson and her daughter, the former wearing an immense pair of glasses. And opposite them sat the stranger, Rupert Whitman.

That he had nothing in common with them, was plain. They seemed, and no doubt were, utter strangers to one another.

And then there were Mlle. Laure, the snake-charmer, and several others, in all of whom Dick took passing interest. That he was known to any of them, however, did not appear.

The snake-charmer, by the way, had that morning, after the little incident of her escaped pets, announced that she was there for the purpose of giving an exhibition of her powers as a snake-charmer, and a little bargaining had secured to her the privilege of appearing in the Hard Luck Saloon.

She had put up posters in the most frequented places about the camp, and when Deadwood Dick

ventured out after supper he found that the coming exhibition was to be the event of the evening.

He had his eyes well about him as he ventured forth, for he did not know from what direction, or at what moment, might come another attack from his two foes; but he saw nothing of them, and following the trend of the crowd, soon found himself at the entrance to the Hard Luck.

There the bar had been closed for the hour, and the proprietor was at the door to take the admittance fee of those who desired to enter.

A notice was up announcing the price of admission, which was not modest, and stating that reserved seats for ladies were to be had at double figures. Rather rough on the ladies, as Dick thought.

Men were already putting up their little "ante," as it was called, and going in, and as time passed the crowd increased. Not only so, but a fever seemed to seize the camp to see this show or fail in the trying. And it was the same with the women as with the men.

Presently, as the hour drew near, the Widow Hawson and her daughter came over from the hotel and passed in to the reserved seats, and soon after them came Donald Mabey with his richly dressed consort.

"Mrs. Mabey, commonly called the "Queen of the Camp," was a handsome woman of her years, but one whose beauty was of the bold type. She was respected, because her position demanded it, but that was all. The title that had been applied to her was of a mixture of respect and ridicule.

She invariably appeared in rich attire, on every occasion, vulgarly so, and to that was due the sobriquet bestowed upon her.

Deadwood Dick gave her a keen glance as she swept haughtily past him and into the room.

Finally he passed in, and took a seat where he might observe the audience as well as the performance.

A rude stage had been constructed at the rear of the room, and on that was the iron trunk that had excited curiosity on the previous evening.

Its contents was no longer a mystery, and Mr. Secundus Po, who was on hand, was made the butt of many jests and jibes concerning the role he had played that morning as a snake-charmer.

By this time the house was packed about as full as it well could be. All the seats were occupied, and about all the available standing room had been taken up.

And now began an impatient hum of applause for the performance to begin, increasing moment by moment.

Deadwood Dick had looked over the crowd well, in order to locate his enemies, if there, and presently he sighted them. They were in a position where no danger could be looked for from them for the present.

Louder and still louder was growing the noise, and at last it burst into a shout as the snake-charmer made her appearance.

She appeared clad in close-fitting tights that had the appearance of bright steel armor. A red sash was around her waist, and a red flower was attached to her breast.

Beyond this there was nothing but the steely, scale-like glitter, and her appearance won another round of applause while she was bowing to her audience.

Suddenly she turned to her iron trunk, threw up the lid, and out came the hideous snakes, glittering and flashing like her own bright garments, and with their spiked collars looking like red-hot points of steel.

As she freed them, she bowed again, and this time in the direction of the reserved seats.

Suddenly, from that direction, came a woman's scream.

Deadwood Dick looked quickly, and saw Mrs. Mabey, the mine-manager's wife, upon her feet, her hands covering her face.

"Take me away!" she cried. "Take me away!"

The girl on the stage stood looking at her in an attitude of keenest amazement, while from another direction came another excited exclamation.

The widow, Hannah Hawson, was leaning forward, gazing with staring eyes in the direction of Mabey and his frightened wife. Deadwood Dick took note of everything, and quietly reflected upon it all.

CHAPTER VI.

THE HIGH-STEPPER'S CONTRACT.

ALL this went to make a little break in the performance.

The glittering reptiles were wriggling about on the stage, to the horror of all who sat immediately near.

The young woman heeded them not. Her eyes were fixed upon the woman who was showing such fear, and she was trembling with suppressed excitement. The snakes seemed forgotten.

And so with the woman in black, Hannah Hawson. She was now upon her feet, staring fixedly in the direction of the mine-manager's wife, and there was an expression upon her face not easy to define. Her daughter remained calm, and appeared interested in all that took place.

All this was of short duration, however. Mabey had sprung to the aid of his wife, and was supporting her.

"Make way to the door, if you please, boys," he requested. "Mrs. Mabey can't stand the sight. Make way, please!" and with his wife on his arm, she with her hands still over her face, he moved in the direction of the door.

"Fall back thar, boyees!" one of the ushers of the occasion called out. "Git a move on yer an' make way fer ther Queen of ther Camp."

"Yas, make way for ther Queen, 'fore she has a spell," chimed in another, not so respectfully.

The crowd fell back, making enough room for them to pass out, and the girl on the stage watched them till they had disappeared before she paid any attention to the snakes that were crawling around her feet.

"There's more than snakes the matter here," thought Deadwood Dick to himself. "I'd give something to know what it means."

The manager and his wife gone, the widow in black had resumed her seat, and now the girl on the stage gave attention to business.

With another bow, she stooped, extended her arms toward the reptiles, speaking to them, and in a moment all were running toward her, eager to twine themselves upon her person.

One after another they climbed to her neck and shoulders, till all six of them were safely there, when she rose straight, making a bow.

As she did so the heads of the snakes were all erect, waving above and around her own, giving her the appearance of a hideous Medusa. It was a sight well calculated to turn the faint-hearted to stone.

This was for some moments, while she made several bows in response to the applause she received, and then at a word all the snakes slipped away from her and dropped to the stage, where they curled themselves into six serpent coils, with heads up and spiked collars flashing.

These collars, by the way, as had been noticed, were flexible to a wonderful degree, so that they never interfered with the movements of the reptiles.

Another bow, in the usual manner with such performers, and attention was again given to the snakes.

The girl called a name, rather sharply, and one of them sprung at her, she catching it as it came and twirling it around her waist, where it clung.

Then another call was made, and another made a spring in like manner, being caught and disposed of the same as the first, and so on until the entire half dozen formed a living girdle about the girl's slender waist.

After bowing right and left, the girl again dismissed them with a word, when they slipped immediately to the floor as before.

She then stooped and began a circular motion with her finger, pointing at the floor in doing so, and the snakes began to twirl around and around rapidly, drawing closer and closer together, until finally they were all rolled together in a seeming ball.

Applause had been constant, but this brought forth a renewed outburst.

Next, with a push of her foot, the performer separated them, and taking a little Pan pipe from her belt she began to play a simple air upon it, whereupon the snakes began to dance, that is, as nearly as the pretense could be made.

Numerous other tricks were performed, consuming something over an hour in all, when, fondling the snakes for a few moments, the girl returned four of them to the iron trunk, retaining only two. These, however, were the largest of the lot.

Allowing them to perch upon her shoulders, she addressed the audience:

"Ladies and gentlemen," she spoke, "I have had the pleasure of showing you all the tricks my pets know. I hope I have pleased you. I will now state that these two snakes are entirely harmless, so far as poison is concerned, and I have a proposition to offer."

This created renewed interest at once.

"What ar' et?" one man called out.

"It is this: I will give fifty dollars to the man

who will come up on the stage here and overcome these two snakes in a fair fight."

"Number Two is ther galoot ye want fer that business," was the shout. "He [has had some experience in ther line o' snakes lately."

This raised a roar of laughter immediately.

"I respectfully decline," spoke up Mr. Po, modestly. "I had all the experience I want this morning. I don't care for any more. I'm willing to let somebody else have a share of the glory that's going around."

"Let any one step up who thinks he can win the money," spoke the charmer. "It is as fair an offer as I can make."

"And what if he don't win?" demanded one man.

"Then he loses nothing, as he has nothing at stake. And I will be on hand to rescue him as soon as he is downed."

"I think I'm ther galoot ter win thet 'ar stake," suddenly spoke up High-stepper Hipe, getting upon his feet and lifting his arm. "I don't reckon as I kin earn that sum o' money in any easier way, miss."

"Very well, sir, step right up here," the girl invited. "If you are willing to comply with the conditions, you shall have a fair chance to show what you can do."

A wild cheer greeted this, and the fellow was urged to make the trial. The crowd wanted to see the fun, and while some urged, others bantered and declared it was something the man would not dare to do.

"I dassen't do et, hey?" the High-stepper cried. "I'll show yer about thet 'ar, me lads. I have tackled a dozen wuss snakes than them is, many's ther time," lying boastfully, "an I reckon I'm good fer these two. Hyar I come, miss, so git 'em ready fer ther slaughter, if yer wants 'em killed."

"Come right on, sir, come right on. But one of the conditions of the fight is that you are not to kill the snakes."

"Oh, well, I don't reckon that will be needed. I kin tie 'em in a knot or two, an' let 'em go at that."

"Yes; that will be quite sufficient," the girl acquiesced, with a smile.

So the High-stepper made his way to the stage, while the crowd awaited in great excitement to see the fight.

Deadwood Dick was looking on with a grim smile. It was his opinion that some rare fun was coming, and that the bully bullwhacker would be worsted by the snakes in a short time.

"Wull, hyar I is," the fellow announced, when once upon the stage, "so let yer horned critters at me. Reckon I kin make 'em sick in one leetle round, an' make 'em hunt their hole in ther big box thar. Fling 'em this way, miss, till I make a necktie of 'em."

"But you have not heard the conditions fully, sir."

"Oh, no matter about them; I'll 'gree ter anything."

"Well, in the first place you must give up every weapon you happen to have about your person."

"What fer?" in some surprise.

"Because you might be tempted to use them, and I am not willing to take the risk."

"Use weapons! Me! And on two sich snakes as them is! Waugh!"

"You must disarm, nevertheless, or it will be no fight and no fifty dollars. What do you say?"

"Oh, well, durn et, et can't make no difference, I don't s'pose, so take my guns an' knife. Them's all I have got."

He surrendered his weapons as he spoke, and the girl laid them out of his reach at the rear of the stage, the crowd approving as she did so.

"And now," she further stipulated, "you must remove your boots."

"Wh—what!" the fellow gasped.

"I say you must take off your boots."

"What's that fer? I wouldn't keer ter tackle snakes wi' no boots on."

"And I wouldn't have you step on one of my snakes with a boot like that for a hundred dollars."

"But you are quite sure they ain't p'izen?" in a good deal of anxiety. "Yer don't want ter make no mistake on that 'ar p'int, b'gum!"

"They are positively not poisonous. Their bite would be as harmless as the bite of a cat, and maybe more so. You can safely take my word for that, sir. I would not deceive you."

"Wull, ef I must I s'pose I must, so hyar goes."

Down he sat, and off came the great stogies, dropping to the floor with a force that almost jarred the windows.

Now he was ready, and so he announced, pull-

ing his belt a notch tighter and giving a hitch at his sleeves. And he certainly looked equal to the emergency.

"Now, sir," spoke the snake charmer, finally, "if you overcome these snakes, fairly, and the crowd shall judge, then the man at the door will pay you fifty dollars. You hear that, Mr. Proprietor?"

"Yes'm, I note et," was the response.

"And if the snakes overcome you," to the High-stepper, "I will see to it that you are rescued before they can do you serious harm. When you give up, you will let us know it by pounding on the floor. Do you understand that?"

"Yas, I onderstand et. When I give up you'll mebbly hear me pound."

"All right. And now look out for yourself, for here they come."

With that, she disengaged the snakes from her own person and threw them at their opponent, and the fight was begun immediately.

High-stepper had no time to consider how he would conduct his side of the contest, for the snakes went right at business, and they were making for his neck before he was hardly aware of it. It was a moment of excitement indeed for the crowd.

CHAPTER VII.

TELLS WHICH SIDE WON.

DEADWOOD DICK looked on with decided interest. It was something novel, even in his experience.

"Well, what do you think about it, sir?"

Dick looked around quickly to see who the speaker was to discover his fellow passenger of the stage, Mr. Rupert Whitman, at his side.

"It is something new under the sun at last," Dick responded, with a smile. "How do you think it is going to come out?"

"I think the man will win. See what a giant he is. If he gets hold of the snakes in the right place, he will make them sick. He must have a powerful grip, I should say."

"Undoubtedly he has, but if the snakes get hold of him in the right place, they are going to make him sick. I am inclined to think the snakes are to have the best of it."

"Why?"

"Well, the performer wouldn't invite defeat for them, nor would she stake fifty dollars unless she felt pretty safe in doing so."

"There's reason in that, but still that fellow looks to be a tower of strength, and if I were betting I would bet on him. Ha! see that! Say, if you want to lay a small wager, to make it interesting, I'll see you."

One of the snakes had come within reach of the bullwhacker's right hand, and with a powerful jerk he had cast it off.

"All right," returned Dick, "I've got a hundred dollars to back the snakes with. Is that too big?"

"Not a bit. I think the man is worth that much. Where shall we put the money?"

"Oh, let our word be our bond, if you are willing."

"That satisfies me, sir."

And with that they gave all their attention to the stage, where things were getting lively.

Mr. High-stepper Hipe had cast off one of the snakes, as said, and was tugging furiously at the other, which had twined around his waist and was pinching him not a little.

"Cuss yer, let go!" he cried, with another tug.

But His Snakeship had other intentions, evidently. Its head was coming around into play.

"Will yer let go!" the bullwhacker bellowed, with another tug. "If ye don't, by ther 'tarnal I'll rip ye in two! I'll stretch ye till—Whoop! Yow-ow!"

The head of the snake had come around and the jaws had fastened upon his arms with stinging force.

With his other hand the fellow made a grab for its neck, but quickly letting go of the arm the snake made a dart at the hand and gave that a nip too.

The High-stepper was stepping high now for a certainty.

"Cuss ther cussed things!" he roared. "They is all p'izen quick, an' that's ther onvarnished fack. A feller can't hold his grip onto 'em er tall. Come hyar, ye darn crawlin' critter, till I—Woughff!"

By this time the other snake was taking part in the fight again, and winding up the bullwhacker's leg, had planted its teeth in his thigh.

High-stepper stepped a little higher than ever, now.

Making a grab for both of the reptiles at

once, he missed both, and they made a march of progress toward his neck.

"Corndemn ther ornery creepers!" the man grated, "but they is hard ter git at, an' that I'll sw'ar. Wouldn't 'a' believed et, b'gum. But, I'll fix 'em, blast 'em. If they gits hurt, miss, don't ye blame me."

"I guess they will take care of themselves," the smiling girl responded.

"Yer do, hey?" the bullwhacker roared. "How's them fer high, then? Thar's one of yer 'tarnel crawlers—Yow-ow-ow!"

Catching one of the snakes at just the right moment, he had succeeded in tearing it off and dashing it to the floor, and as he was speaking he planted his foot upon it to hold it there.

But it did not work that way. The snake's head came around with a fierce blow, and its jaws closed upon the fellow's ankle, causing the cry of commingled rage and pain. And at the same time the other was not idle.

It was getting interesting for High-stepper.

Lifting his foot quickly, at the bite he got, that snake went for his leg as before, while the other was already twisting for his throat.

The man tackled this one next, running one of his arms through its fold to get a better hold upon it. But, it was a fatal move, for immediately that arm was imprisoned, and he had only the other to fight with.

"May I be eternally chawed!" he screamed. "I wouldn't believe et, if it wasn't that it's me meself what's hyar a-doin' et. Dast ther things! I know 'kin do 'em up, but may I ever be bamboozled ef I kin git ther right holt of 'em. May I be most eternally jing-dickered ef I don't chaw ther heads off of 'em!"

With his free arm he laid hold upon the neck of the second snake, and with a grip that promised to choke the life out of it right speedily.

But that was only one of the pair. The other was getting in its fine work, so to say, at the time.

Carrying the head of this snake around to his imprisoned hand, he made use of the free hand to begin another attack upon the other snake.

Finding that its head was waving before his face, with every indication that it meant to strike, he made a hasty grab and succeeded in getting a hold upon the neck of that one.

"Ha! now I has got yer!" he cried. "Jest about a minute of this hyar pressure will settle ye, I'm thinkin'."

He applied all his strength, and choked the snakes till their jaws were agape.

"That seems to settle it, I guess," cried Mr. Whitman, excitedly.

"I don't know about that," demurred Dick. "The tails of the snakes have a little life in them yet."

And this the gladiatorial bullwhacker was beginning to find out, too, while the young woman in the glittering costume stood by as smiling as ever.

The snakes, both together, were lashing their tails furiously, and the bold Mr. High-stepper was getting some cuts in the face that made him bellow. But he still held on like grim death.

Suddenly the tail of one of the serpents formed itself into a sort of spiral spring, and was twisted around the man's throat in a twinkling. Almost immediately the other followed the example, and the High-stepper was in a bad fix.

His eyes started from their sockets, his mouth flew open, and it looked as though the battle was about at an end, but the man meant to make one more desperate effort before he gave up.

Stretching his free arm with all the strength he could summon and the other too, he endeavored to pull the snakes apart, as he had threatened, and there was no doubt that he was master of the situation—if he could hold out. But the more he pinched and pulled, the tighter the snakes drew around his own neck.

Now he was getting black in the face, and was gasping desperately for breath.

"How about it?" asked Deadwood Dick.

"It looks dubious," declared Mr. Whitman.

And so it did. But, just then, another thought seemed to strike the High-stepper.

He threw himself quickly to the floor, and as a last resort tried to break the necks of the snakes by pressing their heads to the boards.

But it was too late for that. His breath was gone, and he knew that he must give up immediately or die. It was one or the other, so letting go, he began to beat a lively tattoo upon the boards with his heels.

The girl had already stepped near, and now she uttered a call. The reptiles at once released their hold and moved to her, when she lifted them hurriedly into the trunk and turned the key.

It was some seconds before Mr. High-stepper was in condition to rise.

And in the mean time the crowd was shouting itself hoarse, making all manner of fun at him.

Presently he was able to get breath, and still clawing at his throat, as if the pressure was still on, he sat up and glared around.

"Whar is ther darn things?" he demanded. "I have locked them up, sir," the girl pleasantly replied.

"Locked 'em up, has yer? Wull, yer kin onlock 'em ergain, fer this hyar thing ain't settled yet!"

"I beg your pardon, sir," was the firm reply, "but 'it is over, and you are whipped, whipped fairly an' squarely."

"Et ar' a lie!" the bullwhacker bellowed furiously. "No two snakes what ever crawled kin whip High-stepper Hipe, an' I wants yer to know it. That was only one round in ther battle."

"It was the end of the fight," the girl firmly announced. "The agreement was that if you gave up, you were to knock on the floor, and I leave it to the audience to say whether you did that or not. I think you did."

"In course he did!" was the shout.

"An' knocked in a mighty hurry, too!"

"Thort he was tryin' ter knock down ther house!"

"You is whipped, High-stepper, an' yer can't git out of et!"

These, and many more similar cries, were heard on every hand, but the blowing bullwhacker would not give in.

"Et war a darn rank misunderstandin'!" he bellowed. "I was callin' fer time, that was all. Turn them ar' snakes out hyar, miss, an' I'll fight ther hull b'ilin' of 'em, p'izen ones an' all!"

"It would be sure death to you, sir, were I to open that trunk now," was the girl's response.

"There is no use your blowing around, for everybody knows you were fairly whipped, and that ought to settle it. You fought well, I admit, but—you didn't get there."

"But I'm goin' ter git thar jest ther same!" the fellow persisted. "I'm goin' ter chaw up every darn snake that's in that box. Yer can't work off no sich snide racket onto High-stepper Hipe, an' don't ye forget it. When I set out ter do a job up brown, by ther great old hokey-pokey, I does et! Come hyar, ye ring-tail crawlers, till I chaw ye!"

And with that he laid hold upon the iron trunk, jerked it up on end, turned it over, bumped it around, and all as though determined either to burst it open or churn the snakes to jelly inside of it.

CHAPTER VIII.

AN INTERVIEW IS SOUGHT.

THIS was clearly more than the girl had counted on. She did not know how to deal with the fellow now, and her face was pale as she saw how roughly he was handling her trunk.

And the crowd, too, was beginning to lose patience with the blustering blow-hard. It was all too plain that he had been whipped, and fairly, too, and to see him going on this way made them tired. Nor did they hesitate about telling him so.

"Git out, yer durn fool!" cried one man. "Yer was licked, an' we all knows et, so what's ther use of blowin' so?"

"Kick him off ther boards, miss," put in another. "He ain't got ther sense of a lame louse, an' if he wants ter know who sez so, tell him it's me! Bounce him off o' thar."

Many other cries of like import were heard, but the High-stepper was paying no attention; he was bending all his energies upon that iron trunk.

"Won't somebody help me, to save my pets from being killed?" the girl made appeal to the crowd.

No one seemed anxious to brave the bullwhacker in his rage.

"Will no one help me?" she cried again. "Isn't there a man in the house who will come to my assistance? My snakes will be killed!"

Still all hesitated, and those who had been loudest in giving directions were the ones most conspicuous for their silence now.

The trunk was being tumbled and battered around on the stage, and the snakes were undoubtedly getting the worst sort of rough usage.

Seeing that nobody near the stage was going to interfere, Deadwood Dick decided to take a hand in.

"See here, you big duffer!" he called out. "You get off that stage, or I will have to come and bounce you off."

The girl looked quickly in Dick's direction, with something of hope in her white face.

The High-stepper, too, looked up to see who had spoken, for Dick's words were loud, clear and ringing.

"Is yer talkin' ter me?" he demanded.

"Yes, I'm talking to you," Dick retorted. "Get down from there and leave that trunk alone, or I'll make you do it. You know whether I can do that or not. Do you hear me?"

"Yas, I heers ye, but durn me ef I'm goin' ter heed ye. Come right on, ef ye think yer kin do et. I've got my dander up now, an' I don't keer fer a dozen like ye. Come right on, an' ef I don't make ye think ther old 'arth hev slipped her 'centric, I'm a howlin' liar."

With that he went on banging the trunk, much as before.

Springing upon a table, Dick was immediately on another, and in less than three seconds came down upon the stage with a solid thump that made Mr. High-stepper pause in surprise.

Dick had him covered.

"Now, sir, you drop that trunk," he ordered.

The fellow let it come down with a vicious bang, and faced his enemy.

"What right has you got ter chip in hyer?" he demanded. "What business has you got ter interfere?"

"Somebody had to," answered Dick, coolly, "and I thought I could do it about as well as any one else. Now you heard what I said, but I'll repeat it. I want you to get down from here."

"And if I don't, what then?"

"Then I'll fire you down, that's all."

"An' yer might git fooled. But, see hyer: I ain't got no quarrel wi' you in this hyar racket, so you git out an' let me finish with ther snakes."

"That was finished, you fool. Everybody knows it was, and what's the use of your kicking up such a fuss as this about it. Come now, off with you, or I'll bounce you double quick!"

"That's ther moosic!" cheered the crowd.

"Knock ther dust out of him!"

"But this hyar ain't no fair!" the bullwhacker protested. "I wasn't licked, an' I 'bject to et. I want ter git at them 'ar snakes jest onct more, an' ef I don't—"

"See here," cried Dick, "do you mean to insist that you were not whipped?"

"Sartain I does! Why ef I couldn't wollop two sich sick-lookin' eels as them is I'd—"

"No matter about all that; do you really hanker to tackle them again?"

"Do I! You jest trot 'em out hyar onct more, an' see me make er eel stew of 'em an' eat et with me thumb. See ef I don't—"

"No matter about that, either. Miss, open the trunk and let them out."

The brave Mr. High-stepper's jaw dropped, and he looked sickly in an instant.

"But, sir, they will surely kill him," cried the girl. "Some of them are deadly poison, and—"

"No matter, let them out! Let him have all the fight he wants for once. If they kill him it will be small loss."

Dick gave her a wink while speaking, and she took the cue.

"Well, he can't blame me," she cried, and sprang to the trunk as if with the intention of throwing open the lid.

The braggart's sickly look had quickly changed to one of deathly hue, and with a gasp he was down from the stage, had grabbed up his boots, and was making off.

"Come back here, and get your fill!" called Dick.

"I'm in er hurry now," was the answer. "Got ter see a man. Can't fool away my time thar all night."

And at that the crowd went wild, hooting and yelling, and making it warm for the High-stepper generally. It was a grand wind-up to what had been a decidedly successful show.

"That's the way to serve fellows of that stamp," Dick remarked, with a bow to the exhibitor. "If you ever run across another of his stripe, you will know how to deal with him. Why, he wouldn't tackle those snakes again for a thousand dollars. And if he ever gives you any more trouble, shoot him."

"I thank you, sir, for your timely help," the girl returned. "Only for you I do not know what I should have done. I was never treated so in my life before. That is the first man who ever insisted that he wasn't whipped, when it was so plain that he was. You see, I never looked for anything of that kind. Allow me to thank you again, which is all I can do."

"Don't mention it," said Dick. "If I can be of further use to you, let me know."

"Thank you; I will do so."

With that, Dick sprung from the stage, and amidst the cheering, went to the spot where he had left Mr. Whitman.

"Well, sir, here's your hundred," said that gentleman, extending the money as he spoke.

"Then you consider it a clear case, eh?" and Dick smiled.

"A clear case! He was beaten so badly he didn't know it. I wish the girl had only let them out at him again."

"She would, had she thought it safe. No, I don't want your money, sir; put it back into your pocket."

"The deuce, no!"

"Well, then, pass it over to the girl. The treat she gave us was worth it, I guess."

"That's what I'll do, and if you'll wait for me I'd like to talk with you a little before we part."

"All right, I'll wait."

Mr. Whitman pushed his way to the stage, where the girl, having said her last words to her audience, was about to retire.

"One moment, miss," he detained her. "I had a wager staked against your snakes, and lost it. I am to pay the money over to you, and at the same time thank you for your splendid exhibition. Here it is."

He tossed the crisp bills upon the stage at her feet, and with thanks she accepted the present, the crowd cheering.

The girl quickly disappeared, two men carrying her trunk after her out at a rear door, while the crowd rapidly passed out the front way.

Deadwood Dick and Mr. Whitman left the saloon together.

"Are you going right to the hotel?" Whitman asked.

"Such is my intention," answered Dick.

"Then we will walk together. You see, sir," in a lower tone, "I have something that I want to say to you, for I have taken a notion that you are just the man I need to help me in a certain direction."

"What gives you that idea?" Dick inquired.

"Well, you are fearless and shrewd, as any one with half an eye could tell, and my opinion of you is that you are a detective."

"Ha! you don't say! What put that notion into your head?"

"I'll tell you, in brief. When you tackled that drunken driver you had a pair of handcuffs to put on him. They are not ordinary things for a man to carry around in his pockets. Detectives have use for them."

"Well, that is reasonable; but I might be able to tell you a different story. But, no matter, if you think I am able to serve you, tell me how."

"Mr. Prichards, you do not deny that you are a detective. Very well, I am willing to believe you one. Whether you are or not, you are capable of aiding me, and I want your help."

"You are taking all the risk, sir. But, what is the trouble?"

"We are here at the hotel now. Let's go in and sit down, and if they have anything that is fit to drink we'll talk over our glasses."

"Sorry to upset your plan," said Dick, "but I don't drink. That need not interfere, however, I am a smoker, and I'll enjoy a cigar while I hear your story. Here we are."

So they passed in, and soon found desirable seats.

CHAPTER IX.

A PAGE FROM A MAN'S LIFE.

"I AM a man traveling with a purpose," Mr. Whitman abruptly began.

"Nothing new or strange about that," remarked Dick, as the other seemed to pause to note the effect of his words.

"I suppose not. A man traveling without a purpose would be a novelty. But I mean that I have an end in view, which makes travel necessary. I feel that I can trust you, and I'm going to unfold myself to you."

"But I do not invite you to do so," said Dick. "And I will add to that, if your purpose is not a strictly honest and honorable one, you need expect no help from me. In that case you will not get it."

"I knew it!" Mr. Whitman cried, in suppressed tone, extending his hand as he spoke and grasping Dick's. "I knew it!"

"You knew what?"

"That I was not deceived in you."

"Then you took me for a rascal—"

"Well, no! On the contrary I took you to be a man of keen honor, and your words prove it. And now for the story I have promised to unfold to you."

"Very well, I will hear it."

"To begin with, let me surprise you by stat-

ing that my name is not what I have given it to be."

"You can't surprise me that way. The West is full of men who are not wearing their own names. You will have to strike harder than that to work up a surprise in me."

"It appears so. But, no matter as to that. My real name, and I'm not ashamed to speak it, either, is Robert Whitney. I am from the East, but have been traveling around through this part of the West for a year or longer. In truth, I have been playing the detective, but with poor success."

"Yes?"

"Exactly. And I have come to the conclusion that it is about time for me to give up going it alone, and take in a good partner. I tried hard to get hold of a professional whom I heard of, but could not seem to light upon him. He was like a will-o'-the-wisp; here, there, gone."

"Who was he?"

"A man who seems to have earned quite a reputation. They call him Deadwood Dick."

"I have heard of him."

"Well, failing to light upon him, I made up my mind to keep an eye open for the first likely man whom I met, and you are the one. I took to you at sight, and after I came to know what you are made of I concluded that you would just fill the bill. Now, I do not expect you to serve for nothing; I am able to pay you well."

"You had better wait till you see whether I am good for anything, first," reminded Dick.

"Oh, well, I'll pay you something for your time anyhow."

"Then you insist upon taking me into your case with you, do you?"

"Yes; if you will come. I know I am not making any mistake. I do not often mistake my man."

"Well, I will help you, to the extent of my poor ability, sir; but there must be some conditions named if I do."

"What are they?"

"Well, I have come to this camp on business. I cannot engage to go away till that business is finished, no matter what comes."

"All right; we'll have it so understood."

"Nor can I bind myself to remain here, should that business suddenly call me away. I must be left free and independent. Outside of that, sir, I will do all I may be able to do to push your cause along."

"I agree to it all. And now let me unfold what the case is."

Dick settled back in his chair, puffing away at his cigar, and was prepared to give attention.

"Some twenty years ago," the narrator began, "Robert Whitney—myself, you understand—married one Mabel Noble, if that was her real name, and it is doubtful whether it was or not. Robert Whitney was not so wise a man then as he is to-day, although he knew a great deal more. I was too smart for my own good. I sneered at the warnings of any pumber of wiser heads, and I married Mabel Noble, a variety actress with whom I had become acquainted, and with whom I was heels over head and brain in the mire in love. I married her, and for a time all went reasonably well. But gradually I awakened to see the situation in its true light. The Whitney family was one of the best in our city. My marriage was considered a blight upon the escutcheon as it were. But the deed was done, and my immediate family, when they saw that I was determined to be true to my part of it, finally opened their doors to my wife."

"It was then that I found that Mabel was out of place in refined society; a girl of pretty face and form, but one who could never hope to hold her own in a drawing-room. I was disappointed, and could not help showing it, I suppose, but still, with the true Whitney grit I made up my mind to be true to my bargain, and if my wife could not shine in the circle to which she had the right, she could at least shine in a cottage, and I would withdraw myself and share it with her. I am glad there was that much of the man about me, although I owe it not to myself, but to the Whitney blood. They were all men, sir, every one; except, of course, those who happened to be of the other sex, and they were ladies."

"Well, I was not a great while in finding out some things which I had been altogether too smart to see before. Mabel had not married me because she cared any more for me than for the dozen others who had danced attendance upon her when she was doing the light fantastic on the variety stage, but had surrendered herself to me because with me would come wealth and station. And she had never thought but she could step right into society and become one of the belles. Poor girl! it was a rude awaken-

ing for her, and no mistake. But she is deserving of no sympathy, for she might by this time have overcome all such obstacles of a temporary sort had she remained true to me."

"She began to bewail her fate at first by declaring that she was not wanted in my mother's house, that my mother and sisters were far too stuck up to treat her decently; when the truth was, they had tried their hardest to adapt themselves to her, and to draw her into some confidence in themselves. She was out of place, and she felt it as keenly as I did. But would have time remedied all that, as I said. The more she felt her unfitted for society, however, the more she turned her eyes back upon the past, and some few months after the birth of her child, a daughter, she suddenly left me, going off in company with a young actor, and that was the last I heard of her for a long time."

Dick was getting interested.

"Well," the man resumed, after a pause, "my family and friends congratulated me, and to tell the truth I was not sorry, for my wife had palled on my hands, owing to her continued upbraidings and somewhat vulgar habits, which had cropped out since the marriage. And then, too, I had a suspicion that she was giving more attention to that young actor than the proprieties warranted. I was not sorry that she had taken herself off my hands, and acting under advice, I procured a divorce forthwith and that settled it. I was none the worse off, being a man, and it was jokingly passed over as a little of wild oats in the otherwise good grain."

"But that experience worked for me more ill than I reckoned on, for it imbibed me against womankind generally, and I never made a second attempt matrimonially, although no doubt a score of admirable matches were secretly considered in the family circle, matches in which I would play the leading role, and one or two I know were excellent; but one taste of the yoke was enough for me, and all my ardor in that direction had been dampened."

"Of late years, however, the desire to know what became of my child has grown upon me. It is not pleasant to know that you have a daughter somewhere in the world, and never know anything about her. I owe her something, and it is my duty to pay it. It is for that lost child I am looking, sir, and in order to find her I had to begin to trace the mother."

"Ha! now I see," exclaimed Deadwood Dick. "And the trail has led you out to this wild land, eh?"

"Yes; it led me here, and here I lost it. Not to this camp, do I mean, but to this section of the country. The trail is lost, and the search is almost aimless, but still I am held to this region, held here as forcibly as I was drawn here. And now comes the point in the affair that brings the thing down to a focus: I have a suspicion that I have this night looked upon my daughter!"

"Ha! now you are coming at something, truly. Where was she? Whom do you suspect?"

"I believe that little snake-charmer is she?"

"The deuce!"

"It is just as I tell you. She looks very like what Mabel Noble was when I first knew her, and the suspicion is forced home to me that she is the missing child. Now, I want you to find out for me whether this supposition is true or false."

"Why not try it yourself?"

"That is just it; I haven't the confidence in myself to undertake it. I might make a mess of it."

"Then you have seen this snake-charmer before, and followed her here?"

"Not so; never saw her in my life before to-night."

"Ha! then it seems you have picked up a clew and a helper at about the same time. But, how would you suggest proceeding? If this girl is the daughter of Mabel Noble—or, more directly, your own daughter, do you suppose she knows her true name?"

"Hard to tell. She may, and she may not. All owing to what adventures and circumstances came to the mother, I suppose."

"Perhaps there's the never-failing birthmark—"

"Nothing of the sort, so far as I was ever aware of."

"And you know of nothing that would start me upon the right track in regard to the mystery?"

"Not a thing. But, hang it, man, you seem as full of ideas as an egg of meat. I believe you are a detective, in spite of your denials—but then you haven't denied it. Go ahead and poke questions at me."

"Well, to begin with, then, what was the name of that young actor with whom she ran off—the mother, I mean, of course?"

"His name? I remember it well enough. It was Warde Cushine."

"What became of him?"

"Lost sight of him at San Francisco. There he and the dashing Mabel had a quarrel, and she gave him a cut with a knife and disappeared. He came near dying, but did not. Know nothing further about him."

"She must have grown to be quite an amiable creature," Dick commented. "You were no doubt fortunate in getting free from her as easily as you did. But too many are around us now for further private talk. I will look into the affair and see what I can find out for you."

CHAPTER X.

THE INNER WHEELS BEGINNING MOTION.

THE rest of that evening passed without further excitement.

Dick's enemies had evidently thought better of attacking him again, as they had loudly threatened to do.

The redoubtable Richard retired at a reasonable hour, and having made sure that his door and windows were secure, gave himself up to the embrace of sleep.

In the mean time, while he and the man Rupert Whitman were in conversation, there was another talk going on that is of as much importance to the unfolding of our plot, and to which we must revert.

It will be remembered that the two women, the widow Hannah Hawson and her daughter, had been present at the exhibition in the Hard Luck.

They left the place together, after witnessing the last of the affair, in which Deadwood Dick had finally taken part, and had gone at once to their room in the hotel.

There, suddenly, by a straightening of her stooping shoulders and the throwing off of her heavy bonnet, the widow seemed to become several years younger.

"At last!" she exclaimed, as she sat down.

The daughter was cool, calm in every movement and word.

She offered no remark till she had secured the door and removed her hat and gloves.

"Then you are quite sure?" she interrogated, as she too sat down.

"Do you suppose I could be mistaken?" sharply.

"It is one of the easiest things in the world."

"Not in my case."

"Then the man is positively—"

"The man is Joel Banks, and no other. I would know him among a thousand."

"But the woman—did you get a good look at her face?"

"No; but there is no doubt as to who she is. It is the wretch who won my husband's affection from me, and who has caused me all this trouble and sorrow. She must not come in my way!"

"You must do nothing rash."

So cool, calm, that other's tone. There was little of a daughter's sympathy in its expression.

"Rash! Would you call it rash to give her what she deserves?"

"You might defeat your own object. That must be the very first thing to be attended to. Don't let that get out of your mind."

"That is so, that is so. I shall try not to."

"Well, now that we have your recognition to start upon, we must go at work to get the proof."

"The proof! Heavens! Isn't my word to be taken?"

"We take it to begin upon, of course. Your mere assertion that this man is Joel Banks would avail nothing in a court, were he to deny it. You see we have only just made a beginning."

"And no telling how long it will take to get the proof."

"It will not take long, depend upon it."

"And while that is being done—"

"You must obey me as though I were your mother and you my child. Upon that may depend everything."

"Well, I suppose it must be so."

"Positively."

"I had rather face them, and tear that woman's eyes out."

"No doubt about it; that is the natural instinct. But you must put that under the feet of Reason for the present."

"And I would like to read Joel Banks a lecture that he will not forget in a great hurry."

"No doubt, no doubt; but women's lectures

have little effect upon men, unless to harden them and defeat the very end in view. And in this case you have got to play a shrewd game in order to get his name affixed to that paper."

"Yes, yes, I must not forget that. I must be guided by you."

"And never fear but you will be guided aright. I think you had better remain in our room as much as possible, or temptation may be thrown in your way, and in your anger you may forget everything."

"No, no, do not think that. I can control myself, I know I can."

"I hardly know; your excitement to-night carried you upon your feet there in the hall."

"Yes, I must admit it; but you may trust me."

"Very well. And it may not take many days to get at the bottom of the matter in hand. Care must be taken not to let it become known who you are."

"You think harm would come of that?"

"It might mean death to you. Who can tell?"

"Not from Joel Banks!"

"Maybe not; but positively from the woman, did she suspect your business. I fancy she looks capable."

"Well, well, you must guide and direct me, Susan."

"Never fear but I will do my part, if you will only be directed and guided by me. Everything depends upon yourself."

"I shall strive to be careful."

They talked on, but little was said that served to throw further light upon the matter.

And while they were conversing, what of the young snake-charmer and her hideous pets? We have more than passing interest with her.

From the saloon she had gone directly to her room, the men carrying the iron trunk there and depositing it where she indicated, she paying them well for their service.

And when they were gone, she turned the key in the lock and sat down with a weary air.

"How tired I am of this life!" she sighed. "I have no patience with anything or anybody. Seems to me I could willingly have witnessed the killing of that wretch by my fighting snakes."

And with the words there came a look upon her face, that was not pleasant to behold.

"But I would not allow that, of course," she reflected, and her face softened to suit the better thought. It did not seem possible that so dark a look could remain permanent on a face so fair and young. And she was both.

"Still, this life is making me hate everything. I am becoming bitter in even my best thoughts, and unless a helping hand is soon put out to save me, no telling to what desperate doings I shall turn. And am I responsible? People would say so, but there is a spirit of evil in me that, once freed, would rule and ruin me. Even as it is, it requires all the power of my better nature to keep the demon chained."

Her thoughts were sad and earnest to a marked degree.

Evidently there was a story of her past that would not be without interest. Who and what was she?

"Yes, yes," she spoke half-aloud, "once that devil part of me is let free, I am lost. But it shall not be freed, so long as I can fight against it and keep it down, and I can do that, unless—unless the fight is too long and hard, and it wears me out. Oh, if I could only come to the end of my purpose, find the person for whom I have been seeking these two years, and learn the truth, the future might open brighter for me, and I might be lifted forever out of the danger. But will it ever be? Ha! am I forgetting that scene of to-night?"

There was a tap at the door.

She rose immediately and opened it, and there was the proprietor of the saloon.

"He spoke pleasantly, but did not state his business. Waited as though he expected to be invited in."

"You want to see me?" the girl questioned.

"Waal, yes," he answered. "I am here to ante over yer broodle, miss. An' a snug sum et ar', too."

"I am glad of that. I suppose you have taken out your share, sir."

"What do I want of a sheer? Et was sheer enough ter see you do ther snake act, an' et ar' worth more ter have a close look at ye in them 'ar trim tights. You is darn pooty, an—"

"No, no, you cannot come in here," the girl interrupted, as he advanced a step. "You had better keep the money till morning, and I shall insist upon your taking pay for the use of the saloon. I will see you to-morrow."

The man's face took on a dark frown.

"Wull, ef yer is so darn p'tic'lar," he cried, "I reckon I will take pay fer ther room. Here's ther rest of et, in this hyar bag. I hasn't counted et, but et ar' all there, all but ther pay fer ther hall."

"Very well," as she accepted the bag from him. "It is not necessary to count it, for I know I can take your word. I am greatly obliged, and will bid you good-night now."

She leisurely but firmly closed the door upon him, slipping the bolts into place.

The next instant she was a fury.

She hurled the bag of money into a corner, and that dark look came upon her face with more force than before.

"A curse upon such a life!" she hissed. "My foes are legion, while my friends— But, I have no friends. Every man is my enemy, and— No, I will not say that now. That man who came to my help to-night has promised to befriend me, and there was something in his face that I know I can trust. What it was I do not know, but it was there. He has promised, and I must see him again."

"But he is the only one. All others are my foes, and not one is to be trusted. And it is just that for which my better nature is dying, dying as surely as this other nature, this demon, is gaining power. But I must—I will keep that down; I will keep it under subjection, or—I will take my life. I will not have it to rule over me, for I know what that would mean. I have seen too much of it in my life. Yes, I must have a friend, and that man's face has told me that I may trust him. And I will, if opportunity offers."

"But that other, the one who paid me the wager he had lost—what am I to think of him? What was his motive? Was it really a wager lost, or was he telling it as a clever lie to further his ends? Time will prove that. But he looked like a gentleman—real gentleman, I mean; a man worthy to be called a man. But it is hard to tell. Ah, me! Shall I ever be able to leave this life behind me? Will the end come—any end besides that of ruin and the grave? Will light ever dawn? Or must the end be suicide, to escape this demon that is—"

A crash at a window, a splintering of glass, and some heavy object plunges into the room and rolls across the floor.

CHAPTER XI.

SEEKING A FRIEND.

MOST women would have screamed, but this girl did not.

She did spring to her feet, however, naturally enough, giving a quick look in the direction of the window.

Nothing was to be seen there save the broken pane, the little that was left of it, and her eyes next moved to the object that had been hurled in, and which had now come to a stop on the other side of the room.

It needed but a glance to show what it was. A stone, and not a small one, around which was a piece of paper securely tied with a string.

"What can this mean?" the girl asked herself.

She looked again at the window, now with more of fear in her face, as though she expected to see some person peering in.

But nothing was there save the hole and the darkness beyond, and recalling that she was on the second floor, and that there was no support outside for any person to rest upon, she knew that the stone had been thrown from the ground below.

The window was on the side of the hotel, near the rear, and under it was what may be termed a vacant lot. The hall ran through to the rear, rooms on both sides, and at the end of the hall was another window. Thinking of this, the girl opened her door, passed out, and looked out from the hall window.

This commanded only a view of the rear, however, and no one was to be seen from it. She had been afraid to look from her own window, for fear of danger to herself.

Returning, she put out her light, another thought that had now come to her.

By this means she was enabled to look out without danger of being seen. But no one was below.

On the street a little further out were plenty of persons, and the light from across the street made objects beneath the window plainly visible. Whoever had thrown the stone had gone.

She drew the curtain with more than usual care before lighting the lamp. It had been drawn before, but perhaps not all the way, and the stone had torn it aside.

The lamp lighted, she made haste to pick up

the stone to see what explanation was to be had from it.

It took her but a moment to remove the string and open the sheet of paper.

On it was a message, in pencil, as follows:

"To Mlle. Laure:-

"There is danger at Red Rock for you. You had better go away at once. It will never do for you to remain here, for there is a plot against your life. You have enemies who would stop at nothing. Go at once, for they are not sure of you yet, and away from here they would not fear you. The danger is here and here only. Be warned and depart.

"YOUR UNKNOWN FRIEND."

The girl read hastily at first, then again more leisurely, and after that she fell to studying the missive with the air of a philosopher.

"Here is something rather puzzling," she said to herself. "Who is this who knows more about me than I know myself? So it would seem, from the tone of this. Why not have come and told me in person as a friend would? If I have an enemy, it looks as if the one who wrote this is the person. I do not know what to make of it. A plot against my life—I do not believe it! There is no reason why any one should want to put me out of the way. No; the reason is different from that, I am sure."

But it was too deep for her to grasp. It eluded her best efforts, even as it might have tried the efforts of a better trained mind. Still, she was not without reasoning process in her mode of thinking, and the question took shape under differing heads.

By whom had the message been sent? Why had it been sent? Why was she wanted to go away from Red Rock?

"I give it up," she finally exclaimed.

Folding the note carefully, she laid it aside for future reference.

"It is more than I am able to understand alone, and I'm going to take in a pard, as the boys say. That young man who helped me to-night has promised to help me further, if I need him, and I'll take him at his word. I'll see him tomorrow. Seems to me there is going to something come out of all this, or else why such a note and in such a manner? Somebody here is interested in me, either for good or evil, and I want to know who it is. And that man is the very person to find out, if I am any kind of a judge. But, ha! this brings me back to where I was when the stone came in."

She stopped, reflecting.

"No; it was when I was interrupted by that villainous proprietor of the saloon," she corrected. "But no matter. I was thinking of the woman who made such an ado at the sight of the snakes in the saloon to-night. It was something out of the usual, that is certain. Women who could not stand the sight, would know it well enough before entering the place, and would keep away. Was it the snakes, or was it—Good Heavens! Can it be possible? Old Inez said my mother would never fail to recognize me at sight, since I look so much like what she was. I wonder if it is possible? But, no, no! I would not believe it! Such a woman as that! I do not like her face—No, no, I would not have it so."

She mused on, but for the most part in silence.

Finally she changed her stage outfit for a gown, and prepared to retire for the night, but before doing so, she took pains to fix up the window that had been broken, and then opened the box containing her snakes.

Out they came, the whole hideous six, and were soon writhing and twisting about over the floor at a lively rate, the girl stepping among them without the least fear, her bare feet frequently touching them.

"I have enemies, have I?" she said half aloud. "And there is a plot against my life, is there? Very well, plotters, if you want to pay me a night-time visit, come on. I think you will get a warmer reception than you are counting on. You will probably wish you hadn't come."

She gave a light laugh, and in a few moments more the light was out and she was in bed.

Little fear of snakes had she, evidently.

On the following morning Deadwood Dick was astir bright and early, and was out to see what was going on around the camp.

Rupert Whitman, too, was up almost as early, and the two met on the hotel piazza—if the Roost's apology for the thing could be called by the name of piazza; and there they had a further talk.

The stage took its departure from Red Rock quite early in the day, and breakfast at the Roost was early accordingly.

Dick and Whitman breakfasted together, and when they came out the stage was at the

door and waiting, with Mohammed Bijukes on the box, now sober enough but looking considerably the worse for wear.

"See hyar," he sung out, at sight of Dick, "be you goin' off with me this trip?"

"No; I have no intention of going off with anybody just at present," Dick replied. "Why do you ask that?"

"Cause ef yer was," Bijukes rejoined, "I was goin' ter dispute ther p'int with yer, that's all. You will stay hyar till yer rots, afore ye kin ride out of ther camp with me."

"We'll have to see about that when the time comes," laughed Dick.

"Et ar' all seen about now," cried the driver.

"When I has passengers I want ter have passengers. I don't want passengers what wants ter be drivers, an' you hear me. It's a wonder we got hyar alive yisterday, with all ther monkeyin' you done. You hear what I'm sayin'."

"It was lucky there was somebody aboard who could monkey you, anyhow," Dick retorted.

Bijukes had more to say, but Dick gave little heed to him, and his last remark, as the stage moved out, was to the effect that he was not going away to stay, but was coming back again.

So the stage set off, with about its regular quote of passengers.

High-stepper Hipe was around, but he was not stepping quite so high as he had been.

"Don't yer fergit, Mohammy," he called out, as the stage gave a lurch and rattled away up the street.

"Bet yer life on't," the driver called back.

And then both the worthies joined in a forced laugh, as if they had something particularly funny in mind.

Deadwood Dick gave no attention to the High-stepper, and the latter took care to steer clear of Dick. He had been taken down several pegs, so to say, and had not yet begun to recover the lost ground.

There was a second breakfast served an hour after the first, or "stage" breakfast, at the Roost, and some little time after that was over, the widow's daughter, Susan Hawson, appeared on the piazza.

Deadwood Dick was still there, smoking, and happened to be alone.

"Good-morning, Miss Hawson," he politely greeted. "How do you feel after your tiresome journey of yesterday?"

"Oh, I feel all right, Mr. Prichards," was the cheery response. "And I see you are none the worse for it, if appearances are truthful."

"Oh, I am as good as new," Dick declared.

He then inquired concerning her mother.

"She is well, thank you, but somewhat nervous," was the response. And then, speaking in lower tones, they turned away toward the end of the piazza, where they remained in conversation for nearly half an hour.

But whether that conversation was important or not could not have been guessed by an observer, for their manner was the same throughout. And when they parted it was about as they had met, with formal politeness, and nothing more. Appearances went to indicate that they were acquaintances of the hour.

As soon as Susan disappeared, another form put in an appearance on the piazza.

This was Mlle. Laure, the snake-charmer.

She was pretty, becomingly attired, and looked as if she might prove a charmer of something higher than snakes.

"Dick was quick to greet her, with all politeness.

"You are looking as fresh as the morning," he complimented.

Immediately her face clouded, and he was quick to see that he had made a mistake, even though he had spoken the truth.

"Flattery is not what I want, sir," she said, and not without a tinge of bitterness in the tone. "I have been waiting long for a chance to speak to you."

"I have spoken no flattery," said Dick, seriously. "But I see you are in no mood for anything but seriousness. Very well, I will be as serious as you can wish. I am no flatterer, let me assure you."

"We'll drop that. You told me last night that if you could be of further use to me, that I should let you know."

"I remember it," Dick acknowledged. "I am ready to stand by what I said."

"And will you be a true friend to me? I haven't a friend in the world. Your face makes me bold to speak thus."

"If you are in need of a friend," said Dick, in all earnestness, "just count on me."

CHAPTER XII.

DICK'S TALK WITH Mlle. LAURE.

DEADWOOD DICK had noted one thing—that tears were in the girl's eyes, ready to burst forth at the least bidding.

It was evidently an effort for her to keep them back, when he made the promise in tones of such earnestness that his meaning was not to be doubted for a moment.

"I accept your offer, sir, gladly accept it," she said, with lips quivering. "May Heaven deal with you if you deceive me, for to be deceived would turn my heart to gall against all of my kind."

"Have no concern about that," Dick reassured. "If I prove false to a promise once made, may Heaven deal with me indeed. If I could refer you to those who know me best, you would have no fear of my playing you false. On my word of honor, I will befriend you in any way I can."

"I believe you. I am going to trust you. I have reason to believe that I am in danger here."

"And you want protection? I can promise you that. Is it that big coward who gave you the trouble last night? If it is—"

"No, no, it is not he. I would not fear him. I have a secret enemy, one of whom I have no knowledge, and yet one who may mean me the greatest harm."

"This looks more serious."

"And so it is."

"Tell me all about it. I can not be of much help to you, unless I know all the particulars."

"I was aware of that, and I had made up my mind to take you in as a pard, as the men of the West say; that is, if you would allow me to do so, and now you have given your promise."

"And my promise is my bond."

"Then I must tell you my story. But is this a good place to talk?"

"As good a place as any, if we are careful not to be overheard. Do not appear to be in too great earnestness."

"I will try not to. I have here a note which you ought to read. It was cast into my room last night, attached to a stone that broke a glass."

"Well, well, this does begin to look like business. It may be just as well for you not to hand me the note openly. Tell me what it had to say, and you can let me see it at another time."

The girl told all about it, as it is known to the reader.

Deadwood Dick listened with much interest to the end. He could not grasp it in full yet.

"Have you any suspicion that points to any person?" he inquired.

"No," the answer; "and yet—"

"And yet what?"

"You would not understand unless I told you my story first."

"Well, then, tell me your story first. And you may look upon me as your brother for the time being."

"I am going to trust you fully."

Deadwood Dick was highly pleased with the progress he was making with the girl, for, as we know, it had been his intention to seek an interview with her, and try to find out something about her past.

Here she had come to him, seeking an interview with him, and not only that, but help. It had played right into his hands in the best possible manner. But it was a case that was going to tax him, he feared.

Not that the getting at the truth would be so hard, for that was likely to come of its own accord, but he had now promised two persons. He had pledged himself to Mr. Whitney to find out about the girl, and had promised the girl to befriend and protect her.

"The very first recollection I have," the girl began, "was the terrible scare I received at being carried around a circus ring on the back of a horse. I was only a tot then, but I remember it well, and how I screamed. From that time it was a series of scares and whippings, and frights and beatings, until at last, at the age of six, I was able to go around the ring standing on the shoulders of the woman who claimed to be my mother."

"Claimed to be your mother?" queried Dick.

"I say claimed, because I know she was not my mother."

"Go on."

"Well, from that time on for a few years, it was a constant scene of change. We were with the circus, and the ring was my daily torture, for I had a fear of horses that I never overcame. I could ride, and did ride because I had to, but it was with a constant fear that was positively torture to me. I was glad when it came to an

end. And the end came with the death of the woman who had charge of me.

"At her death she gave me into the hands of an older woman who was with the show, and who was known as Spanish Inez. She was a snake-charmer, and was called Inez the Witch. I was then about ten, and in another year I was billed as the child snake-charmer. I was a wonder to the gaping country audiences, and I suppose if I had been swallowed by one of the monsters they would have taken it as part of the performance they had paid their money to see."

This with a bitter attempt at humor.

"Well, that is about the sum of my history. I was with the circus till three years ago, when old Inez died. And taking her snakes, I settled down in the city with a permanent museum, where I remained another year. And then I began this wandering life which has finally brought me here."

"And then all this story is without definite purpose," remarked Dick.

"Not so, sir. When she was dying, old Inez told me all she could about myself. It was she who told me that the rider had not been my mother at all, but that I was a child of a singer who had been with the show one season, and who, upon leaving, had given me to the equestrienne at her request. My mother, as she declared, was a lady, but I never believed that. The proof is all to the contrary. But there was one thing she told me, and that which made me what I am to-day. She said that my mother boasted of a high marriage, and had had with her that which proved it, and with her dying breath the old woman told me to hunt the world over for my mother, and force her to tell me the secret of my parentage."

Dick was more than a little interested now.

"But had you anything to work upon?" he asked. "How were you to know this woman when you found her?"

"No! I had no clew whatever. My search has been an aimless one, almost. But that old woman's dying words had been: 'Have no fear about knowing your mother, if ever you fall in with her. She will know you at sight, for you are as much like what she was as one rose is like another.'"

"Ha! Then your suspicion is—?"

"I believe you guess it. That the woman who made such a fuss at the sight of me and my snakes last night, is the one for whom I am searching."

"That is the thought that came to me, miss. I told myself last night, when I witnessed that little scene, that there was more to it than mere fright at the sight of the snakes."

"And so I believed. I watched the woman closely, to get a look at her, but she kept her face too well covered."

"As I saw. And now what is your intention?"

"I have now reached the point where I am not proceeding alone, and where your help will be most welcome. What would you direct me to do?"

"Do you know anything about this woman?"

"Nothing; except that she is Mrs. Mabey, wife of the manager of the Rock Mine at this camp."

"Exactly, and that is all any of us know. I mean, any one who is a stranger here, you see. Now it will be necessary to inquire into her history a little."

"And that is what I am afraid to do. If she is indeed my—my mother, can it be possible that it is she who has warned me to go away from here? Has she recognized me, and does she want me out of her way?"

"It is very likely so. But, you leave it all to me for a little while, if you will, and do nothing yourself till I can have another interview with you. You can remain here a day or so?"

"I have no intention of going away, sir, till I know the truth. Oh! if I could only take you into my deeper confidence, and tell you all my hopes and fears—"

"I do not ask it; in fact, I have read you deeper already than you perhaps imagine. Let us part for the present, for there is a man with whom I must have some conversation."

He indicated Mr. Whitman, who was coming down the street.

"Very well; but do not fail me."

"I shall not. And, before you go, drop that note on the floor here and I will secure it. If an enemy is watching it will hardly be noticed."

"All right, I drop it. And now I go. If you want me, you can let me know."

With that she turned away, leaving the note on the floor, and as she entered the hall a woman moved hastily away from a window in the stuffy

little sitting-room, where, behind the closed blinds, she had listened to all!

That woman was Susan Hawson, who had so recently held a conversation with Deadwood Dick herself!

Dick, as soon as alone, took a cigar from his pocket and prepared to light it, but in doing so let it fall. Stooping to pick it up, he secured also the paper the girl had left there.

By the time the cigar was lighted, Mr. Whitman was at hand.

Dick read the note before speaking, and had made up his mind that it was in a woman's writing.

"Well, I have had the interview with the girl," he said.

"So I am aware," responded Mr. Whitman.

"Well, what result?"

"I hardly know yet. I am going to set you off on a new scent for the present. Do you think you would know your false wife, were you to meet her at this late day?"

"Impossible to say, sir. Why, what have you discovered? I know you have made a bit of some kind."

"Yes, I have. But it is one that is as uncertain as the flight of a feather. You saw that woman at the saloon last night, who almost fainted at sight of the snakes."

"Yes."

"She is the wife of the manager of the Rock Mine. I want you to get a good look at her, at close range, and say whether or not she is your wife of the old days."

The man was almost trembling with excitement.

"How am I to do it? You will have to plan for me, for I am as helpless as a child in the matter, almost. I am afraid I shall make a mess of it, unless you hold me up. You lay the plans, sir, and then I'll do my best to follow them."

CHAPTER XIII.

DOUBLY IDENTIFIED.

DICK looked at the man in a half-amused way.

"That is nonsense," he declared. "You are a man of the world, Mr. Whitman."

"I know it, but I have never taken the world's hard knocks, you know. Money has always stood between. And besides—"

"Besides," Dick finished, "you are afraid to face this former wife of yours. Somehow you have never outlived the fact that you loved her once, and meeting her you might commit yourself."

"By the Harry, but you are a mind reader, sir!"

"Oh, no, not at all. But I can assure you of one thing. If that is the case, a close inspection of this Mrs. Mabey will cure you. If she is the wife of your wild-oats days, she is so changed for the worse that it will be the best thing in the world for you to meet her."

"How do you know what she was?"

"You have told me. She was a beauty, when you first knew her, and just the sort to blind the eyes of a youth."

"And now—"

"Well, she is handsome— But, you saw her? She is handsome, of that kind of beauty, but it is cold, lifeless, painted, hard, bold—a hundred words might be found to describe it. The question is, is she the woman you are after? You must be the one to settle that."

"But, how? What's your plan?"

"Let me reflect a moment."

Dick thought.

"I have it," he finally said.

"Well, let me into it, and I'll do my best."

"You have given out that you are here on the lookout for mining opportunities, as I understand."

"That's what I have let fall, casually."

"Well, have you had your eyes open in that direction?"

"Not a bit; care no more for mining than I do for carrying a hod."

"It never is lost effort to take in all that comes to one's ears, however, Mr. Whitman. I have become posted about things here."

"I believe you."

"This old mine, the Rock Mine, is managed by Mabey. It is fighting hard against the new one that is just beginning operations. Now if you go nosing around a little, pretending that you have money to invest, Mabey will soon pick you up. And in order to get a hold upon you for his mine, will make much of you."

"On your part, you want to lean in favor of the new company at first, but gradually let him win you over, and by a little fine playing you

can get yourself asked to dinner with him. All that is needed is a little care and the exercise of good judgment as points pop up. What do you think of it? Can's you work that little game and gain your point?"

"I might; but it don't suit my ideas."

"Hang your ideas—on a willow for the present. That is, your delicate notions. You want a good chance to study this woman. That is the very best one I can offer to you. And now a word of caution: Don't recognize her, no matter what happens. If she recognizes you, she will show it, and you can easily detect it if you are watchful. But you keep your own emotions well under. And if she sounds for clews, mislead her. Don't let her get any proof for what she may suspect."

"All of which would be easy for you."

"I admit it. But no eyes but your own would be of any use in determining the question."

"Well, I'll undertake it. If I make a mess of it, don't blame me, that's all. And now about the girl, you haven't told me—"

"I've told you all I'm going to till we get this matter settled. After that I will disclose something to you, but I must warn you not to set hopes high on the snake girl."

"And there comes Mabey from the direction of his cottage now."

"Yes; but don't be in a hurry to meet him. Let your falling in with him come about in a natural way."

While they were yet talking, two women came out of the house.

They were the widow, Mrs. Hawson, and her daughter Susan, and they set off up the street. The widow had her veil on, and the daughter had a firm hold upon her arm, as though she needed firm support. And so they advanced toward a meeting with Mr. Mabey.

Presently they met, and it could be seen that the daughter tightened her hold upon the other's arm, and also that the widow stared hard at the mine manager from behind her veil.

At any rate, all this was observed by Deadwood Dick.

They passed, and the veiled woman turned her head to look back, but the daughter pulled her firmly on, and they passed up the valley.

Dick had allowed a smile to play about his lips as he looked. What that smile meant, if it meant anything, need not be speculated upon now. The smile vanished, and Dick turned again to Whitman.

Mr. Mabey soon came up.

"Well sir, I see you are alive yet," he greeted, addressing Dick.

He spoke with reference to the trouble Dick had had with the stage-driver and his bull-whacker pard.

"Oh, yes, there is a little life left in me yet," Dick carelessly replied.

Mr. Mabey then spoke to Whitman.

"By the way," said Dick, after they had made an exchange of words, "Mr. Whitman has been asking me some questions concerning mines here. I know nothing whatever, so I will refer him to you, Mr. Mabey."

"I think I can give you points, sir," Mabey declared.

"But you will find that he is rather in favor of the new company," said Dick. "It may require some effort to set him right, according to your views."

"It will be the easiest thing in the world, if Mr. Whitman is open to conviction. Come with me, gentlemen, and let me show you around the Rock Mine. It will give you an idea of what mining is."

"Sorry," said Dick, "but I cannot go just now. No doubt Mr. Whitman will be glad to embrace the opportunity."

"Yes, decidedly glad," that gentleman declared. "I have been wanting to get some one to talk to who knows all about it, so I'll go with you, Mr. Mabey."

And they set off together, Dick watching them.

"Now, Mr. Whitney," he said to himself, "go in and do the best you can. And if you work it as you ought to, you will kill two birds with one stone. I'll take it easy till you report."

Dick loitered around the hotel, and in the course of half an hour saw the Widow Hawson and her daughter returning.

After they had entered the house he took another turn on the piazza, and in a few minutes the daughter joined him there, their meeting and greeting being about the same as the former.

"Well, what does she say?" Dick asked when they had exchanged some commonplaces.

He spoke in lower tone.

"She is positive in her identification," was the reply.

"And then Donald Mabey is—"

"He is Joel Banks; no doubt of it."

"Then he must be brought to time and made to sign that paper."

"Yes, most positively. But, how is it to be done? That is for you to say. I am good for nothing at planning."

"I know better than that. But perhaps I can suggest something."

"You will have to."

"But there must be a delay. This matter has taken a new departure, and there are two sides to it now."

"What do you mean? What you have told me about?"

"Yes, and more. This man Whitman has gone to see if he can identify the woman."

"And then you are going to make it a double play, eh? Well, better so, but there must not be too much delay, for it is not going to be easy to put this first matter off very long."

"It need not be. I think to-day will wind it up. But, as I was going to suggest, a note to Mabey would bring him to your room at the hotel. Tell him you want to inquire concerning the Rock Mine. There is red-hot rivalry here between the two companies."

"And then if he comes?"

"He will sign that paper before he leaves the room!"

"Perhaps he won't come."

"In that case it is open to us to go to his house."

"Well, it will be all right, either way. What do you think of it all? Is it coming out as you believed?"

"I think it is. It is one of the worst tangles I ever saw, of the kind, and when it is all picked out, there will be some surprises aboard the camp's social craft, I imagine."

"I have seen the snake girl."

"Oh, yes; well, what did she say?"

"She was cold and distant. Said she wanted no sympathy, and that she had a friend who would stand by her."

"You made excuse as arranged, of course."

"Yes; told her if she feared the man who had been whipped by the snakes, that I would stand by her, and all that. She is a strange girl, and I was unable to learn anything more than you had already discovered."

They talked on for some time, and it was a peculiar conversation for strangers to hold.

The day passed by without excitement, and it was near evening before Dick got a chance to speak to Mr. Whitman again.

Mabey had kept him close, had talked mining to him till the man's head was buzzing with it, had taken him home to dinner, and then had talked mine again till it was talked out.

"Well, what luck?" Dick asked.

"She's the woman!" was the answer, right to the point.

"Then you positively identify her?"

"Yes. And she recognized me at sight. She gave a start and grew white when she came face to face with me."

"And what did you do?"

"Well, I tried to follow your directions, and I guess I succeeded pretty well, for finally she recovered herself."

"Did she sound you?"

"Yes; and gave herself away doing it. She mentioned some things of the past, in a general way, that only she and I could know anything about. She wanted to note the effect upon me."

And you succeeded in leading her to believe that it was not as she suspected, did you?"

"Yes, I feel sure I did."

"Good enough. Now we will let the matter rest at this for the time. It will interfere with my other business if we push it any further just now."

CHAPTER XIV.

FORCING A SIGNATURE.

EVERYTHING seemed to be depending upon the action of Deadwood Dick.

And so it was. He was master of the situation, master of even Mr. Whitman's own business, where he had been taken in to act simply as a helper.

At any rate that had been that gentleman's first intention. But the master spirit in Deadwood Dick had speedily made itself felt, and now Mr. Whitman was dependent on him and was playing the second part himself.

But, to push forward.

Mr. Mabey was at his office at the mine, near the close of the day, when a message was brought in and handed to him.

"Who sent this?" he asked of the boy who brought it.

"Woman at the Roost, sir," the boy promptly answered.

"A woman, hey? We'll see what's wanted then."

And with that to start with, he tore open the note and read what it had to say within.

It was as follows:

"TO MR. MABEY:—

"SIR:—As you are manager of the Rock Mine, you must know everything about mining in this locality, and about your own mine in particular. Will you come to my room at the hotel? Would like to see you on a matter of business.

"Yours, etc.,

"HANNAH HAWSON."

"Do you want an answer?" Mabey asked the boy.

"The woman told me to come back and tell her what you said."

"All right. Tell her I'll be right over there."

"Wants to see about mine matters, eh?" he said to himself, when the boy had gone.

The note had not told him anything of the sort, as a second glance at it will prove. It was ingeniously worded to produce the right effect.

"Wants to be posted on mining matters, does she? Well, I reckon I can give her some pointers. No doubt there's some more cash suffering to be invested in mine stock. If that's the case, I must see to it that the Rock Mine gets it."

Giving the boy about time to get back to the hotel, and a little to spare, Mr. Mabey set out after him, and was soon there.

Inquiring in the bar-room which room Mrs. Hawson had, he went up and tapped at her door.

It was opened to him by Susan, the daughter, and he proceeded to make himself agreeable immediately. The widow was seated with her back to him.

"I received your note," he said. "I am only too glad to serve you. Now, whatever it is you would like to know, do not hesitate to ask me. Any information that I can give—"

"Certainly, Mr. Mabey, we know how willing you are, and we are grateful. Now, please sit down here and—"

Susan placed a chair at a small table, on which were pen and ink and some papers.

The man gave her a curious glance, but sat down.

"Yes, yes, certainly; anywhere you will have me," he observed.

"And now, sir," placing a folded paper before him, "here is a document which requires your signature."

At this Mabey looked at the young woman in blank astonishment.

"That requires my signature!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, sir. Examine it, and you will understand."

The man was too amazed to know what he was doing, almost.

With trembling fingers he opened the paper and looked at it, and one look was sufficient.

With a gasp he sprung to his feet, the paper fluttering to the floor, and he stood pale and trembling, staring at the woman before him.

She had now a revolver in her grasp, pointed at his breast.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

A sound in the other direction caused him to look there.

If possible he turned more pale than ever, and his limp arms dropped at his sides.

A chair had been turned, and in that chair was seated a pale-faced woman, while behind it stood the fighting stranger, Mr. Prichards!

"Joel Banks, you know me," the woman asserted.

"I know you not!" was the retort. "My name is not Banks! What infernal bit of foolishness is this?"

Suddenly he had come to himself, and meant to try to brave it out.

"It is no foolishness, sir," assured Dick, grimly. "Your name is wanted to that document, and you have got to sign it."

"What good will the name of Donald Mabey do there?"

"We want your true name, Joel Banks."

"I tell you that is not my name!"

"Joel Banks, you lie," cried the woman in black. "I know you well enough. I am your lawful wife. You deserted me for that—that false creature who is with you, and in doing so, robbed me of my property. I care nothing for you, you may go to the dogs; but I want my property, and you have got to sign it back to me."

The woman was speaking with forced calmness.

A close observer might have discovered that she was bound to the chair in which she sat.

"It was a precaution that had been taken to prevent any assault she might try to make upon her truant husband. And it was a wise one. It forced the woman to keep cool."

"It is all an infernal lie!" the man cried. "It is a blackmail scheme, and I will have nothing to do with it!"

"Then you refuse to sign, eh?" asked Deadwood Dick.

"Of course I refuse to sign!"

"Very well, then, sir; we shall have to arrest you and take you back to Walla Walla. Perhaps there you will own to your identity, and—"

As he spoke, Dick had produced a pair of handcuffs, and was toying with them carelessly.

The man interrupted him, demanding:

"Who are you? What have you got to do with this matter?"

"I am an officer," was the reply. "I am going to see that this wronged woman gets her rights."

Mr. Mabey showed decided signs of weakening.

"And if I sign?" he spoke.

"If you sign, admitting that you are Joel Banks, and allow us to bring in another witness or two to attest the signature, the door will be opened and you will be allowed to go as free as you came."

"And if I don't, what then?"

"These handcuffs, and a trip to Walla Walla."

"I'll sign."

The man dropped upon the chair and took up the pen.

"Very well," said Dick. "Miss Susan, please step down and bring in two reliable witnesses."

Dick had a weapon in hand, and putting away hers, the young woman went out as directed, closing the door after her.

It need not be said that the matter of witnesses had been arranged beforehand, and when she returned she brought with her Mr. Whitman and the mayor of the camp, Mr. Hiram Hawkins.

"Ah!" exclaimed Mr. Whitman, "we meet again, Mr. Mabey."

The unhappy rascal grunted.

"Gentlemen, you both know this man, who and what he is," spoke Deadwood Dick.

They admitted they did.

"Very well; you are required to witness his signature to this document, if you please. He will sign his true name—Joel Banks. This is all that is necessary for you to know."

"It is enough," said Mr. Whitman. "That he has another name need not matter to us."

Mr. Hawkins was staring with mouth agape.

"No, it need not matter," growled the mine-manager. "And it will be a hundred dollars apiece to you to keep the secret."

This was enough for Mr. Hawkins.

Mabey took the paper and signed it; after which Dick attested it in legal manner and the witnesses signed their names in due form.

"Now, Mr. Mabey," remarked Dick, "you may go. We are greatly obliged to you for this favor, and will not have to trouble you again for a similar purpose. You are at liberty, as I promised."

With sullen growls the man snatched up his hat, jammed it upon his head, and was gone.

"I'll fix you, curse you!" he hissed as he plunged down the stairs. "That paper shall never go out of this camp, not if I can help it, and I think I can. It shall be stolen, and a false one substituted for it—I swear it!"

But such threats as that were futile. He did not know the man with whom he had to deal.

Little of importance was said in the room after that, and the mayor was the next to take his leave, and after him Dick and Mr. Whitman.

"Say, who and what are you, anyhow?" the latter demanded, for something like the twentieth time since he had met Dick. "Are you a lawyer, with all the rest? You are a puzzle to me."

"No, I'm not a lawyer," Dick assured. "I am only a common, every-day sort of man—a passenger, as our friend the driver would say. But I have knocked around somewhat, and have picked up a little knowledge in various branches. I'm a Jack-at-all-trades, as it were."

"I believe you. But, now, to business."

"We are not quite ready yet."

"Why not?"

"Reasons I am not prepared to state in full. We will act this evening, after dark."

"And why after dark?"

"We must not be seen going to the cottage in a body, you know."

"True, true. Well, I give it up. You are at the head of it, man, and I have seen enough of you to trust you. But I want to know who you are. When will you give me that satisfaction?"

"Ob, well, say after our business here is done and we are going away. That will be time enough."

With that they parted, and Dick went to his room.

It was near the hour for supper, and he wanted to do some quiet thinking in regard to the tangle he was picking out. Handling a double play, as it had been termed, he had to be careful.

While he was there he heard a shouting below, and the stage came rattling into the camp. He looked out at the window, and as he did so a smile lighted his face. From what he saw he foretold in mind a surprise that was yet to come.

CHAPTER XV.

ACCEPTING A CHALLENGE.

A BRIEF explanation of what Dick saw.

On the top of the stage was a man, only one, and he was tied up with strong rope like a trussed turkey, or worse.

He was a strapping fellow, rough and bearded, a very giant, and one with whom it would evidently be well to have no quarrel, were he free. He was a man before whom even High-stepper Hipe dwarfed.

It was the appearance of this fellow that had caused Dick the smile.

"Whoop!" had yelled Bijukes, as he came to a stop with a short jerk. "Hyar we is ergain, an' I'm ther driver, you bet! No passenger at ther head of ther procession this hyar time!"

He flung out the mail, and then got down from his box.

High-stepper Hipe was just coming to the front, and now he called out:

"Be et all right, Bijukes?"

"Et be," was the answer. "Thar he is, right up thar," indicating the man on top.

All attention was upon the prisoner on the top of the stage, while the two or three passengers were getting out from the inside.

And as they looked, suddenly the man gave out a wild yell, or whoop, that almost made every man of them jump a foot high. It was a terrific cry, and a good many thought him mad.

"How's that fer a war-whoop?" demanded Bijukes.

"Et ar' a peeler," said the High-stepper, with a grin.

The man on top gave another that put the first to the blush.

"Ain't he a screamer?" cried Bijukes. "Ain't he a holy terror, boyees?"

Questions were fired thick and fast now, everybody wanting to know who the prisoner was, and all about him.

"Hold on, hold on," cried Bijukes. "I'll tell yer all erbout et, ef yer will give me ther chance. Look at him well, boyees, fer yer don't see ther like twicet in a lifetime. Keep yer eyes onto him, an' I'll give yer his peddygree. In him yer does behold ther wu'st old rip-ravin' old snorter of ther hull woolly West. He's ther king o' toughs an' ther prince o' terrors. He's ther wonder of ther day as a all-around bad man. Yer all knows that High-stepper is a bad man from Bad Mounting. Wull, he lives right on ther summit, but this hyar galoot ar' so much wuss ther ther mounting won't hold him. He lives in ther clouds a mile above."

The crowd wondered what was coming. Bijukes was urged to go on.

"In ther presence o' this hyar p'izen roarer from ther ragged wilds, sech kids as me and High-stepper pales ter nothin'. We is nowhar, and we knows et, too. Why, he could lick us both, an' wi' one hand tied, as I do believe. Oh, he's jest ther big-horned toad from ther place whar they eats fire, you bet. Gents, let me interdoose to yer notiss ther very wu'st man in ther hull kentry at large. He's so orful bad that he ain't ter be trusted free, an' has ter have hisself tied up that way fer ther safety of ther publick. That's ther way he travels, so's ther have control over hisself. He ar' Fire-eater Flip, he ar', an' yer don't want ter git too near, even ef he ar' tied. Et ar' death, ef he looks at ye hard."

At that juncture the bound man let out another and still more terrific roar.

More and more questions were being put to the driver, questions more than he could possibly answer, taking them separately.

"Yas, yas, yas!" he cried. "Keep still, boyees, keep still, an' I'll tell ye ther hull racket. Yer see, thar's a darn fresh rooster in this hyar camp whar thinks he ar' ther best man whar ever

grewed. Yer knows who I means. Ther passenger whar is thinkin' he done a smart thing t'other trip. Waal, he ar' some on ther lift, I allows. Me an' High-stepper has come to ther 'clusion that he ar' jest one too many fer us, so we is goin' ter try a new dodge at him. I knowed this hyar Fire-eater Flip, an' I let et out ter High thet et would be a good idee ter bring him hyar ter whip ther cuss out of his skin. Haw! haw! haw!"

The driver laid back his head and roared, and so did the High-stepper, while the awful man on top of the stage let out another roar.

Deadwood Dick, at his window, unseen, smiled broadly.

"An' that's whar's goin' ter be done," Bijukes concluded. "We is goin' ter invite ther fancy banty ter come to ther Hard Luck ter-night, an' ef he don't, we is goin' ter hunt him up whar he ar'. Hope he ain't gone."

"No, he ar' byar yit," cried the High-stepper.

"Good enough! Then we proclaimset aloud, so thet he whar runs kin hear, or words to ther same effect, that ther banty galoot whar laid out me an' ther High-stepper is challenged ter show his head inter ther Hard Luck at nine ter-night. Hear ye! hear ye! hear ye! Hear ye ther yawp of ther yawper!"

Another scream from the baddest of bad men on top of the stage.

"Yer has now oppertoonity ter say a say ef yer wants to, Fire-eater," Bijukes observed.

"Wauughhhfff!" snorted the terrible untamed. "Ther man whar gits into me paws never gits out! Ther galoot whar I sets me orful eye on withers an' dies! Ther man whar I eats I never gives up! I'm ther only one of me kind, ther roarin' rage whar has ter travel bound up, so az ter make et possible fer others ter travel in ther same boat. If yer has ther safety of yer camp at heart, don't free me till ther time is up ter swoller me prey. Weaoughhh-h-h-h!"

Deadwood Dick was laughing quietly to himself.

The thing seemed to strike him as something particularly good.

"It is the best thing that could have happened," he said to himself. "It will draw the crowd to the Hard Luck, and I shall be free to carry out my other plans without interruption. But, I must accept the challenge here and now."

He threw up the window.

As he leaned out, he took off his hat and held it before him, at arm's length.

In this way he cut off his view of the terror on the stage top, but could see the others plainly and be seen by them.

"Ho, citizens!"

His call was loud and authoritative.

Immediately all attention was turned to him, and Bijukes and the High-stepper began to hoot and shout wildly.

As soon as Dick could make himself heard, he said:

"I have heard your challenge, my fine fellows, and I accept it. I will be on hand at the Hard Luck between nine and ten this evening. If I am a little late, don't fail to wait for me. I will be there. It will take time to speak for my coffin and pay for my grave, you know. But I will be there, and you may rely upon it."

The crowd shouted, the two plotters hooted, and their champion let out another of his terrible screams.

Dick drew back with a quick movement, and for the time being that was all.

The stage drove to the saloon, the Fire-eater was taken down and carried in, and the crowd broke up.

But there was excitement in the camp, and not a man but promised himself the treat of witnessing the coming fight, even if he had to fight for a place.

A little later Dick heard a knock at his door.

"Come in," he invited.

It proved to be the girl snake-charmer.

"You will pardon me for coming again to you," she spoke.

She stood in the door, and did not enter. In her hand was a note.

"You are welcome to come as often as you like," said Dick. "What is it this time?"

"I have received another message."

"In the same way?"

"No; by messenger. It was sent to my room."

"And what is it this time?" Dick inquired.

"Read and see. I leave it all to you. I will go now."

She put the note into his hand, and withdrew, closing the door.

Dick opened it and read:

"To Mlle. Laure:—

"A friend warns you again for your own good. Go away by the very next stage. Go to San Francisco. Look for letter at general post-office to your address. It will tell you much. Go!"

"YOUR UNKNOWN FRIEND."

Dick smiled.

"It is plain enough now," he said to himself. "There can be little question. I could go out and begin a search with this clew, but it is not needed."

Another and louder knock at his door.

"Walk right in," he called out.

The door opened, and this time it was Mr. Whitman who came in.

"I have come to ask if you are in your right mind," he observed, with a smile.

"As nearly so as I ever am," was the reply.

"And do you mean to say you are going to endanger your life by going to that hole of a saloon to-night to fight that giant?"

Dick laughed outright.

"That's what I mean to do," he assured, "and I want you to come with me. I think I can safely promise you a treat. We will attend to it after we have attended to business."

"Well, I'll go, if you really insist upon doing anything so foolish, but it is against my desire."

"If I didn't go there, they would hunt me up, you know."

"That's so; they did threaten that."

"So, to save them any unnecessary trouble, I will meet them on their own dunghill."

Mr. Whitman had learned enough of Dick's character to know that nothing would turn him from a purpose, so the matter was dropped.

After Whitman took his leave, Dick went to the room occupied by Mrs. Hawson—to still call her by that name, and there he had another talk with the woman Susan, in which plans were arranged.

In the evening, others gathered in that room, and they were Mlle. Laure and Mr. Whitman.

What was there discussed need not be set forth here.

Deadwood Dick was the moving spirit of everything, and he was a mystery to them all—save one.

He had not been idle that day. By a well-laid plan he had arranged it so that Mr. and Mrs. Mabey would be at home that evening.

And not only so, but others would be there, others in whom it were well to repose confidence, for witnesses were needful to everything that might be said and done.

An hour after dark the party left the hotel by the rear way, and moved in the direction of the mine-manager's cottage.

CHAPTER XVI.

MEETING THE MONSTER.

It was Deadwood Dick who knocked at the cottage door.

He then stepped back to allow Mr. Whitman to advance first, as he had been in the house before, and knew its arrangement.

The door was soon opened by a Chinese servant, and Whitman passed in, closely followed by the others, and led the way to the reception-room near at hand, and threw open the door.

Here Deadwood Dick advanced first, with the others right after him, and with a bow to the assembled company, he said:

"Your pardon, Mr. Mabey, but we have a little business with your wife."

The woman had sprung to her feet, pale and trembling, and the eyes of all the company were upon her.

Her own were fixed upon Mlle. Laure.

"Business with my wife?" the mine-manager repeated.

"If wife she is!" exclaimed the Widow Hawson.

"What insult is this?" gasped Mrs. Mabey.

"What business can you have with me, sir?" to Dick.

"We want you to admit the identity of this girl, your daughter," Dick promptly replied.

The assembled company looked horrified.

With a gasp and half-scream the woman sunk down upon a chair.

The mine-manager looked at her in the wildest sort of amazement. It was a revelation for him.

"Robert Whitney," said Dick, turning to the gentleman known there as Rupert Whitman, do you identify this woman as your former wife?"

"I do, positively," was the firm answer.

The miserable woman groaned and buried her face deeper in her hands.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Dick went on, then, "an explanation must be made, in order to establish the facts of this case before you. I will say that you have been brought here through

means of my own to serve as witnesses in this matter. And you need not hesitate, for by you will be established right and justice for this young woman.

"Twenty years ago this woman known to you as Mrs. Mabey was an actress known as Mabel Noble. Deny it, madam, if you can. This gentleman, Mr. Robert Whitney, met her and was infatuated. He married her, and a daughter was born to them. Shortly after that the woman deserted her husband, going away in company with a man named Warde Cushime. Later, she was with a circus. There she gave her child to the keeping of a woman rider, and disappeared. That child is before you here in the person of Mlle. Laure.

"Now, we have no intention of interfering with the happy relations existing between Mr. and Mrs. Mabey, but we do insist upon having this woman acknowledge her identity and that of her child, in your presence. Madam, what do you say?"

In an instant the woman was upon her feet, her eyes flashing with fury.

"I say this," she cried: "that it is a base and infernal lie, from beginning to end. I was never an actress. I was never with a circus. I was never married until I gave my hand to Mr. Mabey. I am—"

There was a scuffle in the hall, and some words between the Chinese servant and some person, and the bursting open of the door interrupted.

Into the room came Secundus Po, the camp bummer, with the Chinese holding fast to him and making vain efforts to draw him back and put him out. At sight of him the woman faltered.

"Let me appear and speak my little part, if you please," Mr. Po cried. "I suspected that something was goin' on, and I have been listening to it all. It won't do for you to deny anything, fair Mabel."

"What do you mean?" thundered Mr. Mabey. "Who and what are you?"

"Keep cool, old sport!" was the response, with a wink. "I know what I am talking about. I am here to say that this woman is Mabel Noble that was, and she can't deny it. Fairest, dearest Mabel, don't you know me? I am he who was, in the better days, Warde Cushime!"

Here was a welcome surprise for Deadwood Dick.

"It is the fact, folks," the bummer went on. "I fell into bad luck, and the fair Mabel switched her affections off upon another fellow. She went off with a circus, and I lost sight of her. But I stumbled upon her again, and I have been drawing my little allowance from her ever since she has been here at Red Rock. She paid me to hold my tongue."

"And why have you spoken now?" asked Dick.

"Because she was going to give that sweet girl the dirty shake, and I wouldn't allow it, that's why. Here is the child's daddy, ready to take her to his arms, and I mean to see to it that our darling Mabel comes to time."

Let imagination picture the scene.

"Well, what do you say now?" Deadwood Dick demanded, turning again to the woman.

"It is false—false!" she cried.

"It is, hey?" sneered Mr. Po. "Mebby you'll deny that you wrote these notes to me, sending me money to keep me away from the house. Mebby you'll deny that you got me ter fire that stone in at the girl's window the other night. Mebby—"

He had taken several letters from his pocket while speaking, and Dick now interrupted to ask for them.

Taking them, he compared the writing with that contained in the notes Mlle. Laure had received. It was the same.

"Can any of this woman's acknowledged writing be produced?" he asked.

After a little delay several specimens were found.

The writing was identical.

Now there could be no further question, and she broke down, acknowledging the truth of it all.

"You own that you are she who was Mabel Noble?" demanded Dick.

"Yes, I admit it."

"And you recognize this gentleman as Robert Whitney, who was your lawful husband?"

"Yes, yes."

"And now your child—"

"This girl is she. Her story proves it, without anything else; but even with no proof, her looks would be enough."

"Mr. Whitney, are you satisfied?" Dick asked.

"I am," was the answer.

Dick turned at once to the snake-charmer, who stood pale and trembling.

"Your long search has not been in vain," he said. "You have found the mother who deserted you years ago, and who is not worthy a thought from you. And you have found more. This gentleman is your father, who has been searching for you for years. Go to him."

Mr. Whitney opened his arms, and with a sob the girl ran to him, resting her head upon his breast.

Without a word more he led her quickly from the house.

Dick motioned to the young woman, Susan Hawson, and she followed after them, for a purpose, that of being near the girl.

"And now, ladies and gentlemen, that is all," said Dick. "Mr. and Mrs. Mabey, we will leave you to your happiness. You are a well-matched pair, and both deserving of the disgrace and exposure that have come upon you. I will bid you adieu!"

"Ditto says I," cried Secundus Po. "I suppose that allowance is cut off, my dear Mabel, but I couldn't see you cast off that girl. Besides, I have owed you this grudge a good while. Ta-ta!"

"And you, Joel Banks," cried the woman in black, "you may cling to the creature for whom you deserted me. I had it in mind to kill you both, but I guess I will not take the trouble. I wish you all the misery such baseness merits!"

The exposure was complete, and all left the house, leaving the guilty pair to settle their own account in private.

By this time it was half-past nine, and the crowd at the Hard Luck was getting impatient, as Dick could hear when he left the cottage.

Hastening to the hotel, he hunted up Whitney, who, leaving his daughter in the keeping of Susan Hawson, was ready to accompany him as he had promised he would do.

"I can never repay you for this great service, Prichards," he remarked, as they crossed the street.

"Don't make mention of it," Dick said, carelessly.

"But I will, I must! You shall have a reward, if you will take one. But, I am dying to know just who and what you are, and—"

"No time now," urged Dick. "Here we are at the Hard Luck."

He opened the door and entered, Whitney at his heels.

At sight of him the crowd gave a cheer. There were Mohammed Bijukes and the High-stepper, in the middle of the floor, holding their terrible Fire-eater, who was still partly bound.

And he was a sight to behold. They had daubed him with blood, the blood of some innocent cat, no doubt, and had put blinders over his eyes. The ropes were yet about him, and they were holding the ends as though he were indeed some wild tiger.

"Hyer he be, at last!" cried the High-stepper, at which the Fire-eater gave out one of his terrific yells. "Yer see we is ready fer ye, mister. An' et ar' all we kin do ter hold this hyar king of terrors. He's dyin' ter git at ye, an' ef ye hadn't come soon he'd 'a' swamped ther hull shebang. We has had ter put winkers onto him, so as ter keep ther flash of his orful eyes from killin' folks. He ar'—"

"Oh, save your breath," cried Dick, "and let him loose. If he is really so bloodthirsty, let him come for me and satisfy himself."

The terror screamed in his awful way.

"Clear ther way!" cried Bijukes.

"Give him plenty o' room ter sashay around!" shouted High-stepper.

A big circle was immediately cleared, and the crowd awaited breathless, almost, with excitement.

After considerable more fuss, and a good deal of blowing and warning, the two men finally cast off the ropes and set their Fire-eater free, springing back out of his way.

No sooner free than the terror jumped about four feet clear of the floor, with arms and legs flying, and giving vent to one of the worst screams he had yet uttered. And as he came down he snatched the blinders from his eyes and glared around to find the man he was to eat.

Deadwood Dick was awaiting him calmly, arms folded, and a smile upon his face.

The crowd could not understand such a man. Surely he was no match for such a giant as this bullwhacker. He would certainly be killed, and yet—he was smiling at death!

The great, hairy, overgrown bullwhacker glared around, with snarls and gnashes of teeth, like a beast of prey, till his eyes rested upon Deadwood Dick, and then— Well, his courage

petered right out. It seemed to ooze away as though the bung had suddenly popped out. He grew tame in a moment, and looked not unlike a sick chicken. What meant so sudden a change?

CHAPTER XVII.

WORDS IN CONCLUSION.

DEADWOOD DICK stood silent and smiling.

The herculean Fire-eater got down upon his knees and groveled before him!

Mohammed Bijukes and High-stepper Hipe stared at him with eyes at their widest and with mouths agape.

The crowd was puzzled, but could not hold back a hearty laugh at this sudden drop to the extreme of the ridiculous. What could it mean?

"Noble chief," cried the Fire-eater, as he bent his head to the floor, "most humbly do I beg parding. Believe me, I did not know it was you I was ter tackle. My feathers is wilted."

"What in ther name o' wonders ails yer?" cried the High-stepper.

"Why don't yer chaw him?" demanded Bijukes.

The Fire-eater sprang to his feet, struck an attitude, and with finger pointed at Dick, exclaimed:

"Oh, poor fools! See, look, behold! Before ye stands ther first, ther last, ther great, ther only DEADWOOD DICK, JUNIOR! I hooked horns wi' him oncet; I am not anxious ter hook ergain."

The shout that went up was deafening.

Mr. Whitney sprang in front of Dick and grasped his hand.

"Is it possible!" he cried. "Are you, sir, really Deadwood Dick?"

"That is what I am called," Dick answered, with a smile, modestly. "It was bound to come out."

"Bound to come out! Why didn't you tell me, when you knew I had been looking for you? Sir, this is a proud moment for me. I can believe all I have ever heard of you."

For two hours that place was in an uproar, and Dick could not get away.

Finally, however, he and Mr. Whitney returned to the hotel, where they repaired to the room where the women were.

"Mr. Whitney," said Dick, there, "let me introduce you to my wife."

He waved his hand toward the young woman who had been known as Susan Hawson.

It was indeed Dick's wife, brave Kodak Kate—as she has been known to us in preceding stories.

And then came full explanations. How they had met Mrs. Banks at Walla Walla, and how her story had led them to assist her in hunting down her truant husband and getting back her stolen rights. These particulars need no dwelling upon now.

Next morning the mine-manager and his consort were missing. And they were never seen again at Red Rock.

In a day or two the others took their leave of the camp, traveling in company as far as their direction was the same. And when finally they parted it was with warm feelings.

Mr. Whitney took his daughter East with him, where, under his love and care, it was pretty certain that the evil spirit she had dreaded, and which she had inherited from her mother, would be forever buried out of sight. Not another thought had she given to her snakes, and they been had quietly killed.

Dick and Kate saw Mrs. Banks safely home, where Dick aided her in getting back her rights. After that, Dick and his peerless life "pard" set out for other fields. It was a life Kate seemed to enjoy, and while she did enjoy it, it was not likely that Dick would break away from his vow and give up his vendetta against evil and evil-doers.

Long may they live, both of them!

THE END.

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